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WALTER NORTH

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INTERVIEW

Q: Today is February 16, 2024, and this is Carol Peasley with interview number one with Walter North.

Walter, we are delighted to have this chance to interview you. Could you please start with a little bit of your background, where you were born, where you grew up, a little bit about your family.

Childhood, Family, Education, and Early Background

NORTH: Sure. I was born in Connecticut and grew up there. My family lived just outside of New York City in Fairfield County. And what to say?

Q: Was your father commuting into New York City?

NORTH: No. My mother was a homemaker, my father was an insurance agent. They had been in that community for some time. It was a well to do suburban community near New York and adjacent to Bridgeport. Bridgeport had been a 19th century industrial success story, but it was fading as I grew up. I became increasingly uncomfortable with many aspects of the affluent lifestyle around me. Some of that, I'm sure, was influenced by my parents encouraging my interest in the news and what was happening. In the fifties and sixties the civil rights movement was a huge eye opener for me.

Q: Right. Did you go to public schools?

NORTH: I started in public schools. I ended up at a private school and that too was part of it. Fortunately, I ended up at a private school that had a public mission and that also, I

think, helped to shape my perspective, particularly about the power of heart, head and mind to transform, to change, to drive progress.

Q: Do you have siblings?

NORTH: I have a sister. And we live in the same community now in Cape Cod, which is why we're here, in part. And my mother's here.

Q: Okay. So, those strong New England roots you can't rid yourself of?

NORTH: Well, that's a good question.

Q: (Laughs) Okay. So, did you travel internationally at all or travel much as a kid?

NORTH: No. We did travel a lot in the States. Mostly camping trips. Going out West one summer. And coming to Cape Cod was a family ritual.

Q: Okay .So did your international interests, did that develop when you went off to college? How did you make the decision of where you would go to college?

NORTH: Well, like many, I was a pretty unsettled adolescent and wanted out of New England. So, a lot of uncertainty and indecision. As a college student I did a semester in London. I was really interested in theater, so that was the first opportunity to really travel abroad. While I was based there I got to Europe.

Perhaps, more formative had been some of the volunteering I did in high school and some of my high school teachers. I tutored some kids in Springfield, Massachusetts, in a Puerto Rican community with a teacher from that private school. That really increased my understanding of a context that I normally didn't see and wouldn't have been exposed to. So—

Q: And that was when you were in high school?

NORTH: Yes, that was when I was in high school.

Q: And when did you graduate from high school?

NORTH: 1968.

And the war, of course, was the other huge driver for engagement. I was a volunteer for Gene McCarthy and, yeah, and that—well, you know, you're the same age.

Q: Yes; 1964-68 was probably one of the most active domestic political scenes in our history, what with the civil rights movement and anti-Vietnam War demonstrations.

So, you went to Lawrence University in Appleton, Wisconsin, which is not close to Connecticut or to Springfield, Massachusetts.

NORTH: I was as far away as I was allowed to go. (Peasley laughs) That's literally—that's sort—well, there was another option in Minnesota, but I ended up choosing Lawrence.

Q: Is Lawrence similar to Carlton and the other liberal arts colleges sprinkled around that part of the Midwest? Is it part of that cadre?

NORTH: Yes.

Q: Okay. So, what did you major in?

NORTH: Well, I majored in theater history, of all things. (Peasley laughs) And that was, again, people can really change your life. I was, as I said, unsettled and spoiled in a lot of respects and given a lot of space. So, I wasn't a great student but a transformative teacher in the theater department got me to participate in a production of a play. That helped me to get back into some more structured things. And so, that was the result. But I think, in retrospect, my interests were always more in real history. Not that theater history isn't real. But more political history hooked me. And I took another course on Russian history with a great teacher who posed a lot of tough questions.

Q: When you were studying theater history, were you interested in going into the theater? Were you a drama student as well?

NORTH: I was an actor and did summer theater out in Idaho, of all places. And acted in a number of productions there and elsewhere. I also directed some plays. But I realized I was probably not sufficiently gifted to break through and that it was—if you weren't, it was really going to be a rough life.

Q: Yeah, right. Just to jump ahead for a minute, did you do amateur theater when you were overseas?

NORTH: I did. I sort of got more into singing.

Q: Ah. Okay.

NORTH: Choruses. And we're still doing that, actually, my wife and I.

Q: Great. My first assignment was in Kathmandu and there was a very active amateur theater group there.

So, when you graduated from college in 1972, presumably, what did you do? What did you decide to do?

NORTH: Well, during college I'd been the president of the student community council and was actively engaged in politics. So, in 1972 a teacher nudged me to help a local candidate after graduation. I was working with a guy who was running for the state legislature, but we were also working on the McGovern campaign. And, of course, we all know how that ended. And some people who were on the faculty had moved from Appleton to Seattle and they asked me to drive their U-Haul van with their furniture out to Seattle. So, I said, "Sure," and I did it after the election. And then, I ended up staying with them for a while and working for the county, the King County Democratic Party. But even before that started, I had applied to the Peace Corps right before I graduated. One of many options I was looking into. But no real commitment. Just thought this might be something interesting. And about a year later the process had worked out and they made an offer. At that point, I had a chance to work down in Olympia at the state legislature in something like a career-path job. And yeah, well, I didn't feel ready to commit to something so. solid. Peace Corps sounded more exciting. I opted for the Peace Corps thing and went to Ethiopia.

Pre-USAID International Development Work

Q: And so that was probably in 1973 or so?

NORTH: Three. Seventy-three.

Q: What was your assignment with Peace Corps? What was your training like at Peace Corps? Was it mostly in-country at that point?

NORTH: It was. So, we came into Addis and then went down to a place called Dilla in southern Ethiopia. We did our training there. Dilla is in a part of the country that produces coffee, a cash crop. Compared to much of Ethiopia, it is more fertile, greener and prosperous but still very poor. Not as stressed in terms of agricultural production and food shortages. Also, not predominantly an Amhara area, rather one of those areas that had been subjugated in the 19th Century.

So, that's where we did our training. I was initially assigned as a teacher to a place in Tigray called Maychew, which means salty water in Tigrinya. And as part of the training, we were supposed to do a trip to visit our sites before we went to them. And so, I did that.

This was 1973. We drove from Dilla, which was poor but on a main road with lots of economic activity. We drove our vehicle north to Addis on a good highway and then further north on a road that had been built by the Italian colonial authorities in the 1930's. The further north we got on the road, the worse it got. And this was essentially the only road on the eastern highland side of Ethiopia. The highland areas have very rugged terrain and a lot of subsistence farmers whose families lived in abject poverty even in the best of times. 1973 was the worst of times.

We started to see hundreds of emaciated people along the highway, desperately begging for food. They had come down to the road in an effort to find help. Hundreds of thousands of others were left behind to face death by starvation in remote villages. There was no evidence of any Government assistance. There was no discussion of what was happening in the state media and no one in the Peace Corps had said anything. It was very clear on that drive that not everything was great in Ethiopia. The people were literally dying of starvation.

Maychew was in the heart of the most drought affected area. By the time I got there, the drought had lasted a few years and these communities had gone through all of their own resources. That trip was wrenching. I couldn't understand how such suffering had evolved, why there was no evidence of help and why no one knew about it outside the affected area.

I was appalled. I had no idea what could be done. We couldn't do much but we did write a letter to Ted Kennedy and Hubert Humphrey telling them what we had witnessed. Thankfully, we were not alone in doing so and a British journalist broke the story internationally. I still don't really understand what the American embassy might have been reporting and what they did or did not know. In any case—

Q: But you all just went directly to write a letter to Washington?

NORTH: I did.

Q: You didn't deal first with the embassy and ask if they—

NORTH: No, I don't think I even thought about that as being an avenue of redress. To some extent it may have been because I am very suspicious of parts of the U.S. government. We somehow had convinced ourselves that the Peace Corps wasn't part of the U.S. government .

So, my teaching assignment was changed because it was such a mess up there. And they put me in a place called Bonga, which is in southwest Ethiopia, in an area then called Kaffa. Again, an area that had been subjugated by the Amharas in the nineteenth century. But a lovely, beautiful coffee-growing country with wonderful people.

And I was an English teacher, teaching English as a second language. That's what I started out doing. And then, the Emperor (Haile Sellaise) was deposed in a coup in part triggered by the famine. (His Government had finally started to respond to it but his effort was too late and that failure had unleashed numerous other grievances with his regime.).

His downfall was followed by chaos with school strikes, closures and demonstrations. Over time, a new government came in and they created a relief and reconstruction commission headed by a very amazing Ethiopian guy named Shimelis Adugna. I got involved in standing up that organization in a minor sort of way. I was reassigned to Addis and spent the rest of my tour there. I worked mostly on nutritional surveillance,

trying to get a better understanding of what was going on. We had an AID-funded (United States Agency for International Development) activity, down in the desert area of southeastern Ethiopia, adjacent to Somalia. In retrospect, the project seems somewhat over the top. We used helicopters to do randomized sampling of the extent of malnutrition in these large, pastoral, roadless, desert areas. They were not heavily populated, but the drought had reached their areas and the suffering was extensive. Getting assistance to that population was extremely challenging. The kind of survey stuff we were doing was a precursor to the more robust famine early warning systems we developed later.

Q: Just a quick question because you mentioned in both areas when you were outside of Addis that you were in areas that were not Amharic. What language were you taught when you were there? Was it an Amharic—?

NORTH: It was absolutely Amharic.

Q: Even when you were going to be—

NORTH: When I arrived there Haile Selassie was still the emperor.

Q: Right. So, even though you were going to Tigray you were still being taught Amharic.

NORTH: Yes. There was little to no sense or acknowledgement of the ethnic complexities of Ethiopia from the U.S. side. Many of our colleagues were Amharas from imperial elite circles, especially the ones who were educated. Very few Ethiopians were well educated in 1973. We had one Islamic instructor. But his background was never really brought into the discussion.

Moreover, Amhara and English were the languages of instruction in the schools. Amhara dominated primary levels but English came in for the middle and high schools. At the University it was almost all English.

Q: Right. So, were you there from 1973 to 1975 with Peace Corps?

NORTH: Yes

Q: You had mentioned the drought and famine and huge relief efforts early on. Did you say you were working with the relief agency?

NORTH: The Relief and Rehabilitation Commission, RRC.

Q: Which has always received very high marks for being effective. Whoops. Maybe it hasn't as I look at the expression on your face?

NORTH: This is really a complicated story. In the early years of the RRC, Shimelis Adugna, an enlightened and humane product of the Imperial system, was given the space and support to set up a very professional operation. But as the worst of the first famine

abated and the broader political dispensation shifted firmly towards a Marxist – Leninist state, the RRC suffered.

Mengistu Haile Marian and the shadowy committee he ran called the Dergue embroiled Ethiopia in a number of domestic and international disasters—reckless social engineering initiatives like land redistribution and sending intellectuals to the countryside to educate farmers, conflicts with neighbors and internally, increasingly bloody treatment of dissent, nationalizing housing stock and industries, etc. A long list.

The RRC tried to distance itself from this and stay focused on service to drought affected populations, but it was not easy. In part this was because, as the social and economic turmoil continued, international support for the RRC waned.

The international presence declined. Those who remained were confined to the capital and there was no free press. Many of the best and brightest fled.

In this atmosphere it was hard to keep the RRC vibrant.

I went back to Ethiopia in 1985 when there was another famine, larger in scale than the one in the seventies. News of the extent of that suffering had also been suppressed by the Government. This time a Marxist-Leninist regime. And the RRC had been unable to prepare and respond to the crisis.

It took another expose and the shock of the world to find an opening to respond to the famine in 1985. The Government hated to be dependent on aid and made it difficult to provide it. But they belatedly moved to strengthen and re-energize the RRC under the leadership of Dawit Wolde Giorgis, a military man. He was a complicated figure but capable. Mostly, he found a way to keep the Dergue and the donors supportive. I remember working with Peter McPherson and negotiating with him.

Q: Okay, that was an important time. When you were there during this period working for the Relief and Rehabilitation group, did you have contact with USAID at that point?

NORTH: Indirectly.

I was actually with a group that was led by a New Zealander who was attached to the UNDP (United Nations Development Program), a guy named Roger Hay. A nutritionist. I did meet a few USAID people since they were the funders of our surveillance program. But the work was carried out by others, many British but including several from CDC.

Q: Okay. So, when you finished the two years with Peace Corps, did you know then that you wanted to have a career in international development or what were you thinking?

NORTH: No. Obviously, to see what I had seen and to see the country go through such awful transitions was incredibly compelling. But I felt that I didn't really have a skill set that was going to be particularly useful for anything. I thought I needed some re-tooling.

Political mobilization as a career at home didn't seem realistic. Nor was I sure how rewarding it would be over the long haul. But I had a friend I'd met in Seattle when I worked on a project for the King County Dems. He decided to run for the county council in 1975. He wrote asking me to help out after Peace Corps. So, that's what I did. His race was a longshot. He'd been an aide to a congressman, but the congressman's district was in southern Washington. My friend was originally from Seattle and had a lot of Seattle connections and was running in King County, which Seattle is a part of. But he was young and so his chances weren't great. But he did pretty well, got close. He didn't make it. Still it was a great campaign.

Then I had to figure out what to do. I took some courses at UW (University of Washington) and simultaneously applied to the School of International Training's master's program and ended up doing that. Through that program, which was an experiential learning-focused initiative, I got an overseas internship. I was lucky enough to get one with CARE in India. That was when I started really getting more work experience and exposure to different settings. India is a lot different from Ethiopia.

Q: Was this just a short-term internship?

NORTH: No, it was for a year.

Yes. India was and is incredibly addictive—such a fabulous place, but sometimes frustrating. That was particularly true in '76 or '77 when I went there. Indira Gandhi's 'Emergency' was still in force and a draconian family planning policy was being imposed, along with a very constraining economic policy and crack downs on her opponents. By the time I left she was out of office—a shock—and very rambunctious politics resumed but the economic and social drags stayed in place.

I started in Lucknow in Uttar Pradesh, spent six months there and then six months in Chennai, where I first met someone you might know named Tim Lavelle, a longtime AID colleague?

Q: Mm-hm.

NORTH: He was the head of the office there. He and his wife were delightful and helpful. The job was basically getting involved in Tamil Nadu's Food for Peace program, mostly a midday meals effort for primary schools. I got to go out to remote districts to reconcile book accounts with physical stocks. Basically, serving the function of an auditor. CARE had excellent systems. In some ways the work was pedestrian but also critical to the program's support. A huge upside was the chance to travel all over Tamil Nadu and adjacent states in southern India. I was lucky, very lucky.

Q: Well and quite different places. Chennai is old Madras, is that correct?

NORTH: Correct.

Q: I just wanted to make sure that I was picturing the right place because it's very different from Uttar Pradesh, so you had quite different experiences.

NORTH: Yes. Lucknow was in the north, had been at the heart of the Mughal empire, the site of the Siege of Lucknow during the 1857 Mutiny and was in the largest state in the country. The impacts of partition in 1947 were far reaching in the northern states with significant Islamic populations. Lucknow had been celebrated for Nawabi culture but most of that had been lost by the 70s and the city and state were trapped in a low growth trap with astonishingly high levels of poverty and population growth. Caste and sectarian legacies were complicated, enduring and a cause of much tension.

Northern agriculture, the source of livelihoods for most families, was mostly based on grains and there were seasons, including a winter with many dark hours and daunting air pollution from open fires.

I spent most of a winter there. Rough. One high spot was a visit to the Himalayas for the first time. That was a chance to get away from the plains and see those amazing mountains.

Tamil Nadu was such a contrast. There were diverse agricultural settings—plantation crops in the hills, coastal communities engaged in fishing and raising copra with large areas between the coast and the hills extremely dry and tough for ag production.

In some ways, the setting seemed less conducive to prosperity than the north but the vibe was more open and progressive, even though there was still a lot of extreme poverty. The quality of governance was higher and social service worked better. There was an educated and engaged leadership, including recycled movie stars who ran as populist riffs off their movie roles. Reproductive choices were being made voluntarily and growth rates were significantly lower than in the north.

There were lingering political tensions with Delhi from earlier post-independence push back from Tamil Nadu to attempts to mandate the use of Hindi as a privileged language. That had led to awful language riots. Ultimately, those concerns were addressed and Tamil Nadu and Kerala led the nation in terms of use of English and social investments. There was also the question of Sri Lanka's treatment of their large ethnic Tamil minority.

As in Uttar Pradesh, I got to see a lot of the state. One contrast with Ethiopia was living in a post-colonial state that still had so much evidence of that long period – the built legacy, like the roads and railways, the legal, education, political, religious and other systems. And the use of English.

Ethiopia, although it had a brief period of Italian occupation in the 1930s and early forties, had never really been colonized by a European power. There were human capacity capabilities in India that didn't exist yet in Ethiopia and complex systems of governance. Democratic politics, a justice system, a school system and a public health system. There was a huge absence of infrastructure and effective governance in Ethiopia.

At the same time, the scale of South Asia was intimidating. Huge and complicated. Nonetheless, in India you felt that things were nudging forward.

Q: You mentioned that Indira Gandhi was prime minister?

NORTH: Right. Emergency rule was in place when I arrived. It was lifted after she called an election she thought she would win but lost.

Q: And was this the period when her son, his name escapes me at the moment, was in charge of the population policy work that reputedly included forced sterilization?

NORTH: Yes, Sanjay, right. A terrible program that hurt a lot of people and made it much harder for effective, humane reproductive health programs to work well in the future. That is tragic because India's population is not expected to stop growing until the middle of this century. A real setback.

Q: And the relationship with the U.S. during that period was a bit—

NORTH: Strained.

Q: Strained, right. And did you sense that at all working for an American non-governmental organization?

NORTH: You know, it's funny. CARE had done a—CARE had been in India since independence. They had good relations with the Government. Not always easy but it worked. The Indian Government actually contributed to the local costs of the operation. As did the States. Indeed, CARE probably had stronger relations at the state level and states had quite a bit of discretion to negotiate individual agreements. The CARE model depended on those contributions from the government. So it was a real partnership and I think that with mutual respect. And most of the staff, including much of the leadership, were Indians. The negotiation process was oftentimes complicated and messy, in some ways, for understandable reasons. For many Indians it was discomfiting to be an aid recipient country. There was a laudable ambition to achieve food self-sufficiency. And indeed, the payoffs from Norman Borlaug's rice work were beginning to pay off and gradually India did achieve food self-sufficiency.

At a personal level I never felt like there was anti-American sentiment directed at me. Quite the opposite. Overwhelming graciousness and warmth was more the norm. Most Indians were focused on making a living and sure, there were some people who were politically engaged but they weren't antagonistic to me. You'd go out to a little—these midday meals programs were operating in little schools in the middle of nowhere. The guy who had the key to the warehouse was usually the head teacher and (laughs) you know, usually very happy to see us.

Q: (Laughs) Okay. So, this was an internship through your academic program?

NORTH: Yes; at the School for International Training.

Q: Did you also have classes and more traditional academic work?

NORTH: Yes, they had an on-campus segment. It was set up for experiential learning. Part of it was on campus and part of it was this internship. This was at the Experiment in International Living in Brattleboro, Vermont.

It was a great program. Their teachers were wonderful people. A lot of the focus was on developing skills to be effective in cross-cultural settings. That included encouraging strong listening skills, practicing de-escalatory techniques, modeling respectful inquiry and other means of being a good partner to drive change. They were incredibly thoughtful about the complications of 'progress' – the good as well as the sometimes not so good outcomes. They challenged us to think carefully about what change might really mean for a community and how important community ownership of the process was. But they also recognized the need to map and address power dynamics that might adversely or disproportionately impact marginalized members of those communities.

Q: Right. You obviously were exposed to these cultural imperatives early on and had sensitivities to the issue. Do you think that USAID does enough to instill those kinds of values and approaches?

NORTH: I am not sure. Our IDI training had a great community based experiential exercise which got to a lot of those issues. But, in retrospect, I would not characterize the culture of AID as being persistently alive to those kinds of issues. Certainly, I think a lot of Peace Corps alumni in AID had that commitment. But others did not. In retirement you think a lot about those kinds of questions. I don't really know that I did enough of that when I was in USAID.

In part this may have been because of an inadequate awareness of imperial histories and their varied post-colonial impacts, including the extent to which the development practice in some respects reflected an extra-inning in that history. Of course, we have our own issues in the U.S. in terms of reckoning with our past.

AID was always overwhelmed by process and successive waves of one kind of distracting reinvention or another. In some ways it's a miracle that by staying focused on certain core issues, like reproductive health, for example, we actually were a part of a successful global development initiative that helped to open up possibilities for many places.

Q: Mm-hm, yes.

NORTH: And again, even in the context of Africa and the post-colonial experience, given our resources, the scale of the need and the local governance/human capital constraints (especially just after independence) and some crazy economic practices it is not clear how transformative USAID was or could be.

Thankfully, today one of the bright spots in the global south is the emergence of so much smart, educated talent. There's so much more self-ownership of the process. Not that it always works out well but it is owned locally. We might have made a modest contribution to that.

Of course, within AID, it's always been a sketchy crosswalk between altruistic objectives and the great power politics of the Cold War and after. Today we face a poly crisis which, I fear, is even more dangerous than what we faced.

And these asymmetric power issues and marginalizing tendencies worked both in and outside the Agency. Early in my career at AID in DC I worked with a group of women who were trying to improve opportunities for women within AID. Things were very slowly starting to get a bit better. Women were no longer out of a job if their partner was in the Foreign Service, but the barriers were still real and significant. In thinking about what's happened since then, I guess I'm struck at the distance not traveled. I saw a recent report that was done on diversity at State/AID. At the senior levels it's better for women, but it's not really great for people of color.

Similarly, our awareness of some of the social and historical complexities of the places we were working in was not always outstanding. You were asking earlier about being sent to Tigray without Tigrinya. I am sure that the Peace Corps wanted to do the right thing, but they were mostly clueless about Amhara imperial rule and what it meant for subjugated people or questions of the relations between the Christian and Islamic communities in Ethiopia. They/we just weren't tuned in to those dimensions. Certainly, the host country government they were working with – literally called the Imperial Government – wasn't working to enlighten them.

Q: Right. I think that's a nice summary of the complexity of the environment in which USAID works. It's not an easy one.

So, when you finished your program, you went back then to King County?

NORTH: I did. Just for a visit though because I was lucky enough to get offered a job by CARE on the basis of the internship.

Q: Oh, okay, so then you stayed in India?

NORTH: I didn't stay in India. They had a separate hiring process which they'd encouraged me to do. And they assigned me to Bangladesh.

So, I went back to Seattle after the internship, waited until the paperwork had been done —it wasn't that long. It was a pretty seamless transition. I went to Bangladesh and managed what was called an integrated development program working with cooperatives integrated development in a place called Tangail, which is north of Dhaka.

Q: And what year was this then?

NORTH: I think it was 1978 to 1980.

Q: So, this was Bangladesh; this was not East Pakistan, but it was still a fairly new country?

NORTH: Absolutely. And the basket case framing of the country was pervasive.

Q: Okay. And so, you were doing an integrated rural development program, but Bangladesh was kind of a model of such programming. Again, I don't know the details of it, but I heard for years about the Comilla Model in Bangladesh, even stretching back to the East Pakistan days.

NORTH: Akhter Hameed Khan was the patron of that and he was a giant. There have been several outstanding development leaders from Bangladesh. Muhammad Yunus is another who comes to mind.

The whole Bangladesh Rural Advance Committee (BRAC)—I don't know if you've heard of them?

Q: Right.

NORTH: So, they've been fortunate in generating some cutting edge thought leadership. Bangladeshis, of course, have a special reputation as being sort of the Irish of the subcontinent (Peasley laughs). They have a huge talent bank, lots of wonderful writers, dancers, musicians, and just incredible capacity to speak and think eloquently. So, there was always that gift – one which made the basket case stuff seem so demeaning.

Not that there wasn't a lot of bad history. The British, horrible famines, Partition, a war for independence and successive autocratic regimes. They got stuck with politicians with limited imaginations and whose pockets could never get filled up enough. In spite of that, Bangladesh has been more of a success story than most would have expected. They're making it economically.

Q: Right. So, you were doing integrated rural development at CARE?

NORTH: Yes.

Q: Was it a USAID-funded project?

NORTH: I think there might have been some AID funding. If so, it wasn't significant. Mostly we focused on setting up savings cooperatives and trying to keep them well managed. We worked with mens' and womens' groups. Womens' participation outside of their homes in rural Bangladesh was a big deal. Women at that point were not even allowed to go to the market by themselves. Access to education and health services was

very limited. So a subtext of the associative element of the program was to facilitate solidarity and empowerment. But always carefully and with broader community engagement. We had a fantastic local staff. Rural Bangladesh is extraordinarily lovely but hard to navigate due to extensive use of boats to access communities. So our staff faced a lot of hurdles in getting out to the groups.

Q: So, you implied when you first mentioned this that it wasn't a very successful program or maybe I misunderstood.

NORTH: I think it was—I think it was successful.

Q: Oh, okay. Sorry.

NORTH: I'm not sure it was scalable nor am I sure how sustainable it was. But I do think it was hugely empowering to the women who got an opportunity to actually meet together, talk and try to save some money for things in their lives. One of the hooks we used to market the program with women was a childhood nutritional monitoring program. We did baby weighing with charts an illiterate client could follow – basically, trend lines though red, yellow and green zones. And we tried to link that to routine immunizations, diarrheal case management with oral rehydration salts and reproductive health services.

Those initiatives were life-saving. They reflected outputs from an amazing lab that had been set up by donors in Bangladesh to work on child survival issues. AID had been a major player in that. The scientists did some really innovative and transformative work.

Taking their products to scale globally was probably one of USAID's most significant achievements. I was so lucky to be around some of the people working on those issues, to use some of their outputs and to see the payoffs. To get it to work meant overcoming huge institutional and cultural barriers.

The co-op management challenges were significant in a low resource community. On the government side there was a culture of responsibility aversion, an unwillingness to hold people accountable and follow up. We had good systems and oversight but that took a lot of staff. I worried that, in the absence of real honest local leadership, sustainability would be tough.

Q: Right. So, you were living not in Dhaka but living in a community outside of the city?

NORTH: Right. I ended up living in Dhaka, but I started out in Tangail. I was living in a zamindar's house. Zamindars were the former pre-partition feudal landlords. It was quite a place in local terms. I had a little apartment upstairs. Downstairs was the office. So, I lived above the office. And we had a fish tank in the front yard. We did some fish demonstrations too. Our programs included a little bit of everything in some ways which was a bit weird.

Q: Okay. And CARE probably had a fairly large office, based in Dhaka?

NORTH: CARE had a huge office based in Dhaka. And ultimately, I ended up going in there to manage, I guess the—I can't even remember what I did. So, I ended up living in Dhaka towards the end.

Q: Okay. And how long were you there with CARE?

NORTH: I was there until I joined AID. Through CARE I meet a lot of people at USAID, including the head of the mission, Joe Toner. He was a lovely person and was kind enough to be extraordinarily welcoming. And USAID's nutrition officer, Jim Levinson, and his wife, Louise, offered me a bed in their huge home in Gulshan on weekends. They encouraged me to apply for the IDI (International Development Intern) program.

Q: Okay. So, were you—I should have asked earlier, were you single at this point or had you gotten married?

NORTH: I was single but I had a girlfriend, who was also working for CARE in a nearby district office at Mirzapur on the co-op program.

Q: Okay.

NORTH: We would occasionally go down sometimes for the weekends in Dhaka. It was relatively close. And for Bangladesh, relatively accessible because you could do it by road. A lot of places in Bangladesh you had to take boats.

Q: So, you said you were there until you joined AID. And when did you actually join AID then?

NORTH: Nineteen-eighty. Just after Reagan's election.

Q: Okay. (Laughs)

NORTH: Happy days.

Q: And Joe Toner was still the mission director?

NORTH: Yes. I think he was still the mission director when I left.

Q: And one of the other things Bangladesh is very well-known for is its success on family planning programs. Was CARE involved at all in that or did you see any of that?

NORTH: I don't recall them being heavily involved in that, aside from connecting our co-op members to the Government system.

There was huge energy around reproductive issues in Bangladesh in the late 70s. The expatriate community in Dhaka was overflowing with people working on reproductive health issues.

Q: Yeah. Right.

NORTH: I met a lot of those people. And a number of other AID people that I would reconnect with in the subsequent decades. Colleagues like Gordon West. At that stage he was still young, single and enjoying life while working hard. I remember tales, perhaps true ones, of him driving his sports car at fast speeds on the road to the new airport which was way out of town and pretty empty. It was probably the only road in the country where you could go at high speeds. (Peasley laughs) Yes.

Q: He's probably never confessed that to anyone since. (Laughs)

NORTH: Oh, you know, he's pretty open about it, I think.

Q: (Laughs) That's good. And did you have any sort of personal exposure to Grameen and to BRAC?

NORTH: Only to BRAC. I hung out with some people who were working with them. They lived in an Armenian Church facility in Old Dhaka that was an interesting spot with a long history. They were acting as caretakers as well as working at BRAC.

Their model and their achievements were awesome. And the integrity of their commitment and quality of their thinking was intimidatingly impressive.

The CARE model was different. More managerial with a heavy focus on systems, developing local talent and a government partner approach. Today, I think they have moved closer to a locally owned model. And they still have outstanding staff.

Q: Okay. So, you were there two years then went off to become an International Development Intern with USAID?

NORTH: Yes.

Q: In—so you said shortly after the election so this would have been in November, December of 1980?

NORTH: No, it was after the inauguration, so probably early 1981.

USAID International Development Intern, 1981

Q: So, was it an IDI class and were there very many of you?

NORTH: I think there were about twenty, but it was—it was sort of cool.

Q: And what were you hired as?

NORTH: I had a little bit of imposter syndrome. I think I got in because of the CARE food experience. I was hired as a Food for Peace officer.

But I didn't think I wanted to be a career Food for Peace Officer. I thought I knew what was involved and it didn't completely appeal to me. Joe Toner and the other people at the AID mission said, "Don't worry,"—such a classic AID response. They said, "Don't worry about that. You can change it when you get into AID." (Peasley laughs)

That turned out to be true—but that's another story.

The IDI training then was fantastic and our group was impressive. Earlier you asked about cultural awareness and respect. Those values were fully integrated into the IDI training. We did a lot of experiential exercises and had interesting readings on those issues.

This was happening as the Agency was transitioning to the Reagan era. We were probably one of the last cohorts to have such a sensitive approach. Private sector led development was about to reorient our mission and trainings.

But we actually went out on a field trip to a rural county in southern Virginia to do a planning exercise. We were meant to work with the local planning agency and community to think about some economic growth strategies for the city of Petersburg and surrounding areas. That entailed a lot of community listening, engagement and research. Petersburg was the site of a famous Civil War battle. But in the early 80's it was an economically depressed area. Issues around race and education were key elements of the problem set. We learned a lot and a lot of it was useful in working overseas.

Q: Okay. So, a good training program. And I assume there were some super stars in there, people that ultimately became leaders?

NORTH: Yes. Absolutely. As I said, I was slated to become a Food for Peace Officer and had been initially assigned to Cote d'Ivoire but another trainee, Pat Rader, was assigned to Indonesia. She was dating somebody who was somehow connected to West Africa. She asked if I would consider switching. We eventually convinced AID to let it happen. And so, I got switched from going to Cote d'Ivoire as a Food for Peace officer to going to Indonesia as an IDI.

Q: But I think that ended up not happening anyway. (Laughs) Or did it?

NORTH: No, I ended up going to Indonesia. That was my first assignment.

Q: As a Food for Peace officer?

NORTH: Well, no. That was the other bizarre thing. It was as an IDI that I was assigned, albeit into the mission office with Food for Peace in it. But it also managed a small grants program. That was what I ended up doing after Mission rotations.

Of course, Pat was a very talented and impressive officer. We had a lot of them in that class.

USAID/Indonesia, Food for Peace/Grants Officer, 1982 - 1985

Q: So, you went out then in 1981-'82 to Indonesia?

NORTH: Well, first I had to do language training in Indonesian.

Q: Ah. So, you took Bahasa?

NORTH: Bahasa in Washington. They didn't do overseas training. So, that was a twenty-week program. I don't remember how long the IDI program was, maybe ten or twelve weeks in DC, I'm not sure.
I probably got there in 1981. Tom Niblock was the director.

Q: Ahh. He was kind of famous. (Laughs)

NORTH: He was definitely an impressive man, very much of another era and complex. I think he had been the child of missionaries, and he had a son who was also in the Foreign Service.

Q: Right.

NORTH: He was older, somewhat formal and distant.
And I was—of course, it was a huge mission, a very lowly intern.

Q: Right. And they were famous for some rural development programs. I vaguely recall hearing Niblock's name and an integrated rural development model.

NORTH: Right, the Philippines is where he cut that model. Indonesia was ruled by Suharto who styled himself as bapak Pembangunan (the father of development) and was a supporter of technocratic, large scale development projects like those Niblock championed.

But what did I know? I had never been to Southeast Asia. Getting read into that world, especially Java – the center of gravity in the archipelago—was amazing. I don't know how much time you might have spent there but Java is just a fascinating, complicated, culturally rich and interesting place. Indeed, all of my posts have turned out to be similarly mesmerizing. They deserve close study and approximations of understanding.

I'm still not sure I fully understand Java but I loved being there and trying to figure it out and how that worked in terms of development.

Java essentially dominated a huge archipelago that was and is ethnically and religiously diverse. There was a deep cultural legacy from the Buddhist and Hindu eras that saturated the nominally Islamic faith of the vast majority of the Javanese. Within that Islamic community there was a lot of tension between a very conservative element and a more tolerant version of Islam. That had led to conflict in Java after Independence, especially in the bloody events leading up to Suharto becoming President in the 60s. Similarly, the authorities in Java and some outer islanders like the Acehnese in north Sumatra clashed. But there were also difficulties with minority communities on Sulawesi, in Timor and other eastern Christian majority islands, and in Irian Jaya.

A lot of this was linked to the colonial experience, the impact of the Japanese occupation and the struggle for independence. Irian Jaya (West Papua) had been left with the Dutch after independence but had ultimately been handed to Indonesia but not with local people having much of a say in the assimilation. Similarly, the Indonesians before Suharto had sour relations with neighbors like Malaysia and Singapore. Suharto ultimately improved those relations and his able Foreign Ministers helped to found ASEAN which became a great regional stabilizer. But there was a lot of angst about the ongoing Portuguese rule of part of Timor and ultimately, when they had the chance, the Indonesians grabbed East Timor and occupied it with our tacit support. During my tour I managed programs in East Timor, Aceh and Irian Jaya – all difficult places to work due to underlying popular dissatisfaction with the Suharto regime.

Q:. So, you were managing a small grants program. Was that with local organizations?

NORTH: It was with a mix of local and international groups. It was probably the best job I ever had. I had a portfolio of about thirty to forty projects at any given time. It was a competitive program. It was focused on basically anything that was development and community-based. I had a good excuse to go everywhere in Indonesia and I got a huge chance to really come to know it. So, I went everywhere from Aceh to the island of Papua.

Q: I was in Thailand during this period, and I recall that all the Southeast Asian missions had something called a PVO Co-financing Project. Is that what this was?

NORTH: That's exactly what it was.

Q: And it was interesting because they were all designed to strengthen local non-profit—local civil society organizations, local NGOs. And this was in the early eighties.

NORTH: That was part of the approach and there were some examples where it actually worked.

It was sort of like a subversive element of the overall program a repressive regime winked and let the Americans do some interesting things, albeit very carefully. We supported the legal rights movement, Islamic local schools, nascent environmental justice groups, translating humanistic masterpieces into Indonesian and keeping international eyes active in Aceh, Timor and Papua. When Indonesia finally opened up in 1998 many of the people who had been involved with those groups and in those efforts were ready to step up and lead the pro-democracy struggle. One of the environmental groups we worked with was headed by a woman named Erna Witoelar., She ended up in the post-democracy era being heavily involved in environmental stuff. And when I went back there as mission director in, I don't remember, two thousand something, she and her husband were key players in President Yudyono's government.

There were many others like that, and, more broadly, through the Fulbright program, our impact was huge.

Q: And I assume that they had a large Indonesian staff within the mission and as the junior guy running around all over the country you might have worked very closely with a lot of the FSNs (Foreign Service Nationals)?

NORTH: We had some amazing FSNs. There was a man named Victor Pandjaitan in my office who was immensely patient with me and knowledgeable. He was a Sumatran Seventh Day Adventist Batak– there were a number of them in the mission because we didn't work on Saturdays. (It's odd how FSN staff in different missions do or do not reflect the diversity of the host country. In Indonesia, Adventists and Christians (more generally) were a very small minority but we had a lot of them on staff. They were great people but over my career I started to learn to be a bit more sensitive to the cross walk between the larger society and its reflection inside our offices.). Victor was hugely competent and really helped me to navigate and understand Indonesia and the mission culture. The Batak are often depicted as being hard chargers and blunt. Victor was polite and quiet but plain spoken.

The female admin staff were incredibly welcoming. They were all members of an arisan – a social group that meets regularly and has a revolving fund each chips a bit into each month and once a year a member gets the monthly take. They loved to throw lunches for the young American officers. So, they would invite us to their lunches about once a month. They were a lot of fun. Let's just say they had a really humorous approach to life. (Peasley laughs)

It's not really fair to make generalizations about local staff in comparison to cohorts in other missions because there are so many factors driving staffing and staff retention. Nonetheless, in Indonesia at the time I was first there, perhaps due to the extremely large number of American staff, their voices were not often in the substantive mix in an active way. They had huge influence and were indispensable to getting things done but in tough project reviews many were cautious and reluctant to speak. The Javanese often talk about how important it is to be 'halus' which sort of means polite but it also refers to a method of conflict resolution which prizes indirection and discretion.

In India and Bangladesh with CARE I had always seen the local staff as being very much in the mix and active players. In India we could have great discussions with the local staff and you'd be in and out, back and forth.

Q: And argue. And argue. (Laughs)

NORTH: Yes. I loved it. But Indonesians know how to get their message across as well.

But they weren't the only ones reluctant to be assertive when I arrived at the mission. It was a very traditional, top-down kind of vibe. I was reluctant to speak in meetings and junior staff were treated like juniors. However, very shortly after I arrived Niblock was replaced by Bill Fuller and it was like night and day (Peasley laughs). Bill encouraged people with different perspectives to be part of the discussion. He welcomed people getting in there and talking things through. We had some powerful, impressive personalities, like Doug Tinsler, Joe Stepanek, Lisa Chiles, Marge Bonner, Nancy Tumavick, Jim and Molly Gingerich, Bob Simpson, Steve Mintz, Terry Myers, David Calder and others who were wrestling for resources and programs. They were trying to get things done. And we'd have these robust discussions. Project design then was a much more complicated disputative kind of discussion. And not just limited to the mission. It had to go back to Washington. Bob Dakan, was our desk officer, another great, great guy. So sad that he passed away recently.

Anyways, there were big fights. Bill was open to that and to containing them. And to doing interesting stuff. I got a huge, huge introduction to the mysteries of development from those folks. Mine was a bit part but I was a good sponge.

Q: And you got to see a lot of different role models and different styles...

NORTH: Yeah. Yeah. (Both laugh) And my boss was a guy named Ross Coggins. My father had died just after I arrived in Indonesia. Ross and so many other people in the mission were so understanding and helpful. They arranged for me to go back for the funeral. From then on Ross was like a second father to me. We were very close until the end of his life. He was a great mentor. He grew up in a small town in Texas, married his college sweetheart, arrived in Indonesia as a Baptist missionary in the 50s and left the church to work with Bill Moyers and President Johnson on social issues. He loved Indonesia and spoke the loveliest Indonesian. A tremendous man.

Q: Ah, that's wonderful. I'm assuming that, given your level as an IDI, that you didn't have a lot of exposure to the embassy but that may not be correct. Did you have any sense of how USAID related to the embassy and to the broader foreign policy environment at that time?

NORTH: I would say limited except for one area. One of the programs I managed was a program with Catholic Relief Services in Timor-Leste, which, as you know, was occupied by the Indonesians and forcibly integrated into Indonesia. There was a lot of local

pushback to the occupation. Timor was predominantly Catholic and the Catholic Church had a presence.

Because of this program I did a lot of work with the political and economic sections. Mostly trying to keep everyone on the same wavelength. Fortunately, on this program, there was not much long distance oversight so we had some independence.

Q: Who was the ambassador? Was Wolfowitz there during that period or was he—?

NORTH: No, he came afterwards. Oh, God. I can't remember.

Q: No, that's fine. Not to worry. So, how long were you there?

NORTH: I was there for at least four years.

Q: Okay, so two tours.

NORTH: Not quite. I left a bit early. I had an onward assignment to go back to in Washington because I had met my now-wife while I was studying Bahasa Indonesian in Washington.

Q: Ah.

NORTH: I had applied for a job in Washington, doing grants, NGO grants in the PVC Bureau (Private Voluntary Community) Bureau.

Q: Right. That was, I think, the bureau that was headed up by Julia Chang Block?

NORTH: Julia, yes. She was a force. Another character.

This was 1984/5, Ethiopia suddenly emerged as a crisis again. I was still in Indonesia and a guy named Steve Singer came out from PVC. He spent some time with us and he discovered that I had been a volunteer in Ethiopia. He asked if I would shorten my tour and do a bridging TDY (Temporary Duty) in Ethiopia before my new assignment in DC. He was very understanding about my personal situation. out

USAID/Ethiopia, Drought/Emergency Relief Secondment, 1985

So, I ended up going to Ethiopia with Fred Fisher and a team of—because of the tensions in our relationship with the Ethiopians - we were only allowed to have a mission of five U.S. direct hires. And we had five wonderful people. Fred was an amazing leader. And it's funny because I had done an internship with him as part of the IDI program and had not come away with the most positive perspective. He was very formal and organized. Those and other strong management skills were brilliant in the humanitarian and political challenge we faced. I saw him put together a massive operation in partnership with a

difficult Marxist government and the international community. His management skills and his leadership style were highly effective. He was able to manage up as well and had a strong relationship with Peter (Peter McPherson the Administrator of USAID) and the State system. I went back to Ethiopia, left Indonesia early and then arrived back in Washington.

Q: Okay. So, this was the famine in 1985 that prompted—

NORTH: Right. The 'We Are The World' moment.

Q: Well. So, there was a special task force. And this was the famine in which there initially was reluctance. to provide assistance because it was the Mengistu communist regime. And Peter McPherson, working with the White House, the president, apparently President Reagan is reported to have said something about—

NORTH: "A hungry child knows no politics."

Q: Peter McPherson was obviously heavily involved; did he come out to Ethiopia and spend time with you all during that period?

NORTH: He didn't. The task force that you were thinking of was headed by three awesome guys, Steve Singer of FFP, Brian Kline, the Deputy Director of East Africa and Tim Knight from OFDA (Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance). They were the task force in Washington but Peter was very engaged. OFDA was then a relatively small office and had a succession of gifted leaders like Gen. Julius Becton, Julia Taft and Andrew Natsios. Relief operations of the scale and duration of the famine response in Ethiopia were unusual and the needs were not just in Ethiopia. Over the next several decades OFDA became increasingly effective and developed amazing capabilities. Ethiopia became the forge through which it became a much mightier machine.

This task force between the Africa bureau, OFDA and Food for Peace got that ball rolling. What we faced was horrific. The famine of 1985 was a bad and larger re-run of what I had seen in 1973. This time a ruthless communist government had basically repeated the same denial that the imperial government had done twelve years earlier. People were again dying from starvation because they couldn't access food. Ethiopia logistically was a hard place to get food into. First, there were only three ports – Djibouti and Awawa were located far from the central highlands where most people lived and one was in a conflicted area. (Massawa in Eritrea). Djibouti was not connected with the highlands by a good road and cargo had to move by an ancient train. So throughput of hundreds of thousands of tons of food aid was tough. And it takes months to get food delivered from places like the US. And roads in the interior were still patchy. Then there was the lack of an effective food transport system of trucks and warehouses. We needed to get massive amounts of food in there quickly. It was never going to be quick enough. There was a lot more suffering even after the Government belatedly and reluctantly asked for international help. Even though they had asked it was still a toxic environment with the government not facilitating but actively resisting. There were exceptions like the head

of the RRC (Relief and Rehabilitation Commision), Dawit Wolde Giorgis. You can imagine the difficult situation he was in – caught between his bosses and us.

There were bad, bad vibes between the U.S. embassy and the government. The government had arrested FSNs, had spies within the embassy. They would only allow us five people for AID. They put us in accommodations where we were being bugged and monitored and all that kind of stuff, like Eastern Europe. Yet we had to try to make it happen. A lot of people did great stuff but at the same time you felt like you were running in place and not getting the emergency operations up and running.

We did a lot of airlifts, for example, C-130s. But that's—the carrying capacity of C-130s is very limited. Nothing seemed easy. Take trucks which I just mentioned. Getting them in was one issue, but even finding enough to buy that would work in Ethiopia's tough road conditions was agonizing. And then you had to take care of them and find fuel. (At this time fuel was in short supply in Ethiopia due to a lack of foreign exchange caused by bad economic policies and the costs of conflicts with neighbors and internal forces.)

The government wasn't being helpful. All kinds of barriers to getting things done. And later they had ideas to 'solve' the problem that were very pernicious. They began a program called Resettlement. They claimed - "Basically, the solution to this problem is to move people from the food insecure areas in the north down to the more fertile 'unsettled' areas of south western Ethiopia. And we're going to force them to do it. We're not really going to consult with the people whose land they're going in to take. We're just going to put them there. We're not going to really provide them any resources to be successful."

They were looking for a Marxist-Leninist social engineering solution, which may or may not have been sincerely driven. Most of the northerners wanted to stay where they were. And a lot of the people where the food distress was happening were in rebel areas because there was also an ongoing Tigrayan-Eritrean revolt against the central government. And that's where a lot of the food problems were.

Another tough issue was the situation of the Falasha, the Ethiopian Jews. Many were rescued and taken to Israel by way of Sudan in a clandestine effort with some kind of deal with the Sudanese government which we probably helped to broker.

Then, on top of that, because Ethiopia had become this epicenter of international interest and concern, you had the We Are The World phenomenon. Everybody and their brother wanted to come and visit and see what was happening. So, with a very small embassy staff and our even smaller AID staff, trying to get the work done and manage high profile visits —everybody from Harry Belafonte to Ted Kennedy – was an extra treat. They were generally well-intentioned and often knowledgeable but not always.

Finally, there were ongoing issues with the Hill's oversight. Mostly helpful but not always.

Q: (Laughs) It was an intense experience.

NORTH: It was an intense experience. Things did finally get better. Ethiopia, unfortunately, has been repeatedly disappointing. But I will always care deeply about Ethiopians and dream that they can find a better future.

Q: And you all did an important job that saved lots of lives, I'm sure.

NORTH: At the end of the day, yes, but the loss of life was staggering. Famines are usually slow onset in nature. As Amarta Sen observed they don't happen where there are democratic systems and structures to get the word out.

Q: Yes, right. Were there other donors that were heavily involved? And were you working with them?

NORTH: Yes. My major focus, actually, was liaising with other actors. There was a UN-appointed coordinator—Kurt Jansson. I worked with him and his team to try to get all these pieces to come together in a way that would make it a program that worked. He was Polish and very adept in managing the government and getting us the space to do what we needed to do. That was an adroit balancing act between not appearing to favor the West versus the Dergue and trying to keep the focus on the humanitarian needs.

Q: So, you said that you were there for a year.

NORTH: I think it was about a year.

Q: Did that unit then become a small AID mission that continued on after?

NORTH: Eventually, it did. Fred stayed and then, Bill Pearson came out.

Q: Okay, that's how AID re-established its mission —because AID had left completely, is that correct?

NORTH: Right.

Q: Okay. So, when you came back to Washington, did you go to the Food for Peace Office or the PVC Bureau?

NORTH: I did. I did initially. I was working on a small grants program like what I'd been doing in Indonesia.

But then, Steve and Brian and Tim said, "We really would like to strengthen the Ethiopia desk," and so, they asked me to do that. But that was quite disruptive administratively. Carol McGraw somehow found a way.

Q: She was the head of the executive office for the Africa bureau?

NORTH: Yes.

Q: Employees often get caught in the middle of these battles. (Laughs)

NORTH: Yes. It was one of those awkward things. I felt I'd made a commitment to them and yet, I also really cared about Ethiopia.

Q: So, then did you become the Ethiopia desk officer within the Office of East African Affairs?

AID/Washington, Africa Bureau, Ethiopia Desk Officer, 1986 - 1990

NORTH: I did. And it was one of those awkward things. A guy named Dick Eney had been the desk officer. He was a civil servant. He was a really lovely person but he suffered from narcolepsy. He stayed on and was very helpful.

Q: Yes, right.

NORTH: His willingness to be a good colleague and to be kind was so impressive.

Q: Right. But again, it was a very high-profile position which engaged a lot with higher levels within USAID and externally?

NORTH: Absolutely. I spent a lot of time with Peter and the task force, the State Department, the Hill. Yes. It was good though.

Q: Can you talk a bit about the interactions with the Hill; that dimension would have been interesting, I suspect?

NORTH: Steve Morrison, who does health for CSIS (Center for Strategic and International Studies), was one of the staffers I worked with. He came out to work with us in Ethiopia eventually.

Q: And so, were these authorizers or appropriator staff?

NORTH: Both.

And also, sometimes committees, other committees would be interested. It varied. There was a very active house hunger committee led by Mickey Leland. Tragically, his involvement ended with his death in a plane accident. Several of our staff, including Tom Worrick and his wife, were on that plane. Terrible and perhaps it could have been avoided.

Jeff Clark was another one of the key staffers on the Hill.

Q: Was it just keeping them informed or did they have issues? Were they critical?

NORTH: We got into issues. There were a lot of legitimate spaces where oversight was helpful. Questions about costs, logistical complications, the delays—why does it take so long to stand up this program? Why aren't you doing it quicker? When the resettlement program started happening in earnest, there were a lot of concerns about that. Of course, there is also a lot of interest also in the Falasha evacuation and immigration. And posturing around how evil this heartless, communist regime was etc. A correct view but not one that made our work easier.

Q: Yeah. Right.

NORTH: That period was when I first met Gayle Smith.

She was representing—perhaps not representing but in a way, sort of representing the TPLF (Tigray People's Liberation Front) relief program.

Q: Yeah. She was a journalist or she had originally gone as a journalist to Ethiopia?

NORTH: Something like that. She also had links to the Eritreans.

Q: So, things began to morph from drought-related famine and conflict-related famine to more discussion about the war that was going on within Ethiopia itself?

NORTH: No, I would say that conflict was always on the table. When you look at the map, where was the famine the worst? It was the areas where they were fighting.
So, how do you get food in there that isn't going to be captured and misused by either side? How do you get it to real people that need it? How do you prevent it from being used as an instrument to advance the political agenda of either side?
It was really hard. Kurt Jansson and the international community played an effective but constrained role in trying to diffuse elements of that. But it was not easy and it was not 100—it could never be 100 percent successful.

Q: Right. Right. I know you said you need to stop.

NORTH: I do.

Q: So, I'm going to suggest I turn the recording off right now.

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Q: Okay. Today is February 23, 2024, and this is interview number two with Walter North.

Walter, when we finished up last time you were—you had finished up your one-year TDY in Ethiopia helping with the famine relief effort there and gone into the Ethiopia desk officer position in the Office of East African Affairs in Washington. Do you have further thoughts about that work before we move into some of the other things you did in the Office of East African Affairs?

NORTH: Sure. Thank you, Carol. And thanks for doing this. Remember, I started as a Peace Corps volunteer in Ethiopia. I saw the negative consequences of a government that was out of touch with its people and led by an Emperor. The system was entirely dysfunctional in terms of reporting what was happening to higher authorities and getting people to act, to be responsive. The negative consequences were huge, huge suffering at a scale that seemed at the time to be immense. And then, fast forward from 1973-'75 to 1985, and here we were again. And this was with the government that had thrown over the imperial government and put in place a system that was supposed to deliver better results for people. But its failures were worse and the scale of the suffering was much larger. And their inability or unwillingness to acknowledge it and respond initially was terrible and awful.

But the reactive prism for outsiders had become the prism of the Cold War. So for the Americans to step up and the West to step up in the aftermath of what had been sort of a proxy war in Somalia and other Dergue inspired adventurist initiatives was a big deal. The Derg was the name of the totalitarian government that had replaced the emperor eventually. There was a transition period in the seventies. It took a while but they ultimately emerged and a man named Mengistu became the dictator. And Mengistu and his people waged this war with Somalia and further immiserated their own already incredibly poor country. They weren't investing in their people. They drove land collectivization programs which made food production even worse. And there were other awful ideas. One involved getting the intellectuals out of the university and sending them to the countryside to educate the masses. Similar to what happened in China. Total disaster.

So, when the famine in 1985 was revealed to the world, they were also fighting a civil war with irredentist movements in places like Tigray and Eritrea, which at that time were still a part of Ethiopia. As you noted in our discussion, it was really a tough sell for the Americans to want to even be helpful. And even if they wanted to be helpful, you had an antagonistic government which had locked up FSNs from our staff at the embassy, which seriously limited the number of people—we didn't have an ambassador, we only had a chargé d'affaires because they wouldn't accredit anyone. And they were hunkered down in the mission on the hillside where the embassy was located. Every step was a struggle. Getting, ultimately, permission to establish a presence of five U.S. direct hires (Fred Fisher, Rick Machmer, Cathy Gordon, myself, Jim Pagano and Cookie Dwyer) was an achievement. But when we arrived we faced basic challenges just finding some place to live. Initially I lived with the political officer and her family on the embassy compound. The nationalization of rental property had killed the real estate market. The embassy couldn't even find places to put us on the open market initially. Several of us ended up

staying in a hotel. But Robbie Newell and Charlie Hefferon were kind enough to cope with me for quite a while.

Q: You probably felt, again, like a PCV (Peace Corps Volunteer). (Laughs)

NORTH: Well, it was—but it was a much better place than I had ever had as a PCV. I had running water and electricity. Their house was on the embassy compound. The compound used to be a beautiful place. That part was good. But we weren't surrounded by friendly people so everything we did was hard. And plus, this sort of the given situation, you had massive numbers of people starving. We had the food, but we didn't have the means to get the food to the people, partly because of the conflict but most fundamentally because of lack of trucks and other facilities to move and store these massive amounts of food from the three ports that served Ethiopia, which were far away from where the people who in need were located. So, getting the food was sort of the easy part, although it took a while to get there, but once it got there, there was this huge problem of having enough trucks to move it, so a lot of what we did was basically focused on logistics. And we had a guy named Don Anderson, who Fred had found, who was a logistical expert who came and helped us to sort it out. And other TDYers like Bill Granger to help us. A lot of great people came forward on TDYs and ultimately, we got a handle on things. As I said, there was a great UN diplomat, Kurt Jansson, who helped us to navigate with the government and the international community to create the space to do this. But none of it was easy and it was also happening in the full glare of the international world jumping in with things like 'We Are The World' and visits and that stuff. But we talked about that last week.

So, for me it was the second time to see this happening in the same place. And you know, didn't anyone learn anything? So, yes, I guess those are some final thoughts.

Q: Okay. Thanks very much.

So, you then go into Washington and the crisis is continuing in Ethiopia.

NORTH: Right, right.

Because they—then they went on to—they sort of magnified the problems by saying, "Our solution is to resettle people from places that are suffering," who actually came from non-Amhara communities. They wanted to send them other areas in the Southwest that had historically been subjugated by the highlanders. Little planning, weak implementation, many abuses. Horrible idea. So, that became a part of the discussion. Plus, the conflicts were continuing. And as we mentioned last week the movement of the Falasha Jews out of Gondar.

Q: In many ways the ethnic diversity of Ethiopia makes it a very difficult country politically under any circumstances. Is that correct?

NORTH: Absolutely. In large part, the residual tensions are a legacy of the history. In the imperial period, which was Haile Selassie and his forebears, it was claimed that their lineage had gone back to King David. But it was more complicated than that. Contact with the imperial powers was a factor. This sort of played into the Ethiopian style of governance, which was often warlords marauding across the landscape. Many of the predominant ones were from Tigray and Amhara. They fought each other and fought off the outsiders. Within the Amhara and the Tigray there was also conflict between different guys. And then, you have the Islamic influence moving in and out. When the first significant European contact happened in the sixteenth century with the Portuguese, there was a guy named Ahmed Gragn, Ahmed the left-handed. He was a one-armed Islamic warrior who had encroached seriously on the Christian Ethiopian empire. Then he was pushed back.

Nonetheless, the presence of an Islamic community was pervasive. In most areas they were a minority but in some places, like Harrar, they were the majority but one often ruled by Amhara orthodox Christians.

So, a lot of what happened later was sort of a continuation of the kind of fighting and the style of governance from earlier eras.

Q: Right. And the ethnic differences still prevail today?

NORTH: They do but there aren't that many places when you scratch the surface where there aren't ethnic differences.

Q: Right, right.

NORTH: And if you don't pay attention to that you can be surprised. Think of Tanzania. Did you spend much time in Tanzania?

Q: No. Just brief visits.

NORTH: If I understand it correctly, one of its great gifts has been the absence of an ethnic majority group that aims to predominate. So far they seem to have figured out a way to manage their conflicts. Julius Nyere's leadership may have helped too.

Q: Right. Well, from Washington, as the Ethiopia desk officer, were we involved with the resettlement? Were we having dialogue with the Ethiopians about it or were we wringing our hands about it?

NORTH: We were vociferously opposed to it. We tried to get them to put constraints on it. We encouraged the international community to pay attention to it. We worked to get the program to be at least done in a humane way, if it had to be done.

Q: When you came in to be the desk officer, was there still the five-person mission out in the field?

NORTH: It was. That didn't change. That did not change until the Dergue was finally beaten by the TPLF and the EPLF (Eritrean People's Liberation Front) at the end of the eighties.

Q: So, that whole time you were the desk officer then, was—

NORTH: Yes. It wasn't until 1989 or maybe 1990 when a more traditional mission was created.

I had left East Africa and the Ethiopia desk before Mengistu was thrown out. But obviously, the food problems had abated significantly. There was improved infrastructure and well managed logistical operations were effectively getting resources to people that needed them, except in the areas of greatest conflict.

Q: At some point you moved up to become the Deputy Office Director. When was that?

NORTH: Yes. I don't remember when. Steve Mintz was the Director and Brian Kline was the deputy. Then Dave Lundberg came in. I became the Deputy after Brian left.

Q: Okay. So, at that point then you began to look at all of East Africa as opposed to just Ethiopia. This was also when many people were talking about the African renaissance leaders.

NORTH: Right. And you know, this was the eighties and so Ethiopia and Sudan were sort of outliers. Sudan was just a whole other can of awful stuff with Nimeiry. We had a huge program there again, sort of the prism of the Cold War. And John Koehring was the director at one point. We had staged the Falasha exodus through Sudan. But most of the rest of East Africa, with the exception of Uganda, was at peace and doing more or less ok.

Uganda had been in the throes of Idi Amin. They were just coming out of that. Dick Podol was the mission director who re-established the AID program when Museveni, supposedly an African renaissance figure, emerged as the victor. (Peasley laughs) At that time he seemed like a great—a wonderful thing. I remember visiting Luwero, the killing fields, with Dick just after Museveni took over and what happened there was a nightmare. But things seemed hopeful.

Q: Yes, right.

NORTH: I was going to say it sort of seemed like the rest of East Africa was in a more benign place but that's not really true. This was still an era of really bad macroeconomic policies and HIV/AIDS was just starting to emerge.

Q: (Laughs) The individual countries do show a different picture—

NORTH: Nyerere for all of his wonderful gifts as a peacemaker, a peacekeeper and a respecter of the idea of democratic transitions was unusual in giving up power voluntarily. His African socialism had impoverished Tanzania and goods were in short supply but there was peace.

I'm sure you've heard stories about going there and there's no toilet paper in the hotel rooms. Or that you had to check out an electrical bulb to use in your room because they were rationed. That was sort of also Nyerere's legacy. And Kenya was similarly a mixed bag. And then, of course, in places like Burundi and Rwanda there were early rumbles of the awful events that were to come.

Q: Right. So, there was (laughs) a lot of conflict.

NORTH: The other thing was that all the economic policies in the region had things like fixed exchange rates and fiscal blowouts while taking on a lot of debt. Structural adjustment was just gaining energy with all its pluses and downsides.

Q: Right.

NORTH: Basically taxing the rural sector to perpetuate the privileges of the urban elites while not really investing in people.

Q: Right. And so, recognizing this, as I recall, the Africa bureau then, under the leadership of Larry Saiers, did work out with the State Department an interesting program using economic support funds, ESF, to do economic policy reform programs. It was called the African Economic Policy Reform Program and it was seventy-five or $100 million. Do you recall whether any of the East Africa countries or you personally were involved at all in that?

NORTH: Yes. This was the beginning of what is now called the Washington consensus, right?

Q: Yeah.

NORTH: It's the idea that economic reform was the path to a better future for everybody. And to the extent that you move away from fixed exchange rates that is indeed a huge equalizer and empowering move for rural people, poor people and consumers more generally. But there were flaws in the EPRF approach. Just getting markets to work more efficiently had some awful social welfare outcomes. And how much were these programs truly owned by local people? We didn't think enough about how they might be done in a way to minimize the adverse costs for weak segments of the population and to sustain investments in social capital, whether it was health programs or education. In retrospect, it was too simplistic and heavy handed. And also, the scale of the resources that were being thrown at the problem from the US were insufficient.

Moreover, there was an over-focus on really labor intensive project design and approval. These were the days when project design was seen as sort of a science, something even Talmudic. We'd have these extended, incredible discussions about the details of these policy reform programs. And I'm not sure how much value that added ultimately.

Q: Right.

NORTH: We were trying to act in concert with the international community. There was an interest and an appetite in the eighties in the international community to try to do more for Africa, in part because of the Ethiopian famine. People did step up. The multinational donors like the Bank and IMF were more important than they are now. What do you think from what you saw in Malawi?

Q: I don't disagree with what you're saying although I do think it was important for us to begin to focus on those issues and to have better dialogue with countries about more appropriate economic policies.

Given the complexity of the region in which you were working and the number of political and economic issues, I assume that you must have worked very closely with State Department and how were the relationships with the East Africa office in State?

NORTH: Yes. We had some wonderful partners. There was a lady who was the Ethiopia desk officer, Jean Szymanski, who was just such a great colleague. And unfortunately, she died very young. She was just so amazing and good. There were other great people in the East Africa office. And we had incredibly thoughtful people like Princeton Lyman who was a Deputy Assistant Secretary in AF.

I never felt there was an "us versus them" thing. They were struggling with the same issues we were. They were serious. They were focused, considerate. Yeah. So, yeah, I mean, there were just several of them. And we also did a lot with the Bureau of Refugee Affairs.

Q: Right. And so, there weren't any serious disagreements with State even though there were different views?

NORTH: Sure, there always were. What we do and how we do it is hard for other people to understand. Our procurement maze and its timelines have never been nimble, although in OFDA we had a wizard at procurement and they were exempted from a lot of niff-naff. The speed at which we could move was often frustrating and we wanted to make investments that mattered. Sometimes we would be asked to do something that seemed more symbolic than effective but there is sometimes a good reason to do it.

In peacekeeping efforts where confidence building is so critical it sometimes made sense to do or try things you were not sure would work if it might be seen as a sign of sincere listening and engagement. A signal if you will.

Some people in AID were more or less comfortable with that and others not so keen. In aspiring to help people find peace or development success we need to keep our eye on the long game. How can we be good partners in helping them transform their societies? How to encourage their efforts to create their own futures in a way that delivers for people sustainably? The State time frame was sometimes shorter and the focus more transactional but those are legitimate parts of the problem set.

Q: Right. So, how long were you in the East Africa office? Or what did you do next and when did you do it? (Laughs)

NORTH: Okay. I got a lucky opportunity to do long-term training.

Q: My goodness. That was fairly early in your career to get that.

NORTH: Not really. I mean, it was ten years in.

Q: Oh, it was ten years in. I lost track of time.

NORTH: I was living with my now wife and because of her career I was considering exit ramps from AID. I began retooling by doing law school at night. I was thinking about leaving AID. And then, Tom Ward, who was in HR, somehow found out. He had been a friend and mentor in Indonesia. He encouraged me to do long-term training to try to keep me in the agency. His gambit worked.

Long-Term Academic Training, Harvard, Masters in Public Administration, 1990-1991

Q: What did you do?—

NORTH: I did a master's degree in public administration at Harvard.

Q: At Harvard. So, you went back to your New England roots.

NORTH: Yes. (Peasley laughs) Yes. Reluctantly. I had really wanted to follow a program at Stanford that Fred Fisher had done.

Q: The Sloan Program, right?

NORTH: Yes. In large part it was also because Stanford was where my wife had been working before we met and she really liked California. But that didn't work out.

Q: So, at what point was this long-term training? Was this like eighty—

NORTH: I think it was 1990. I think I graduated in '91.

Q: So, when you finished that, where did you go?

NORTH: That program was transformational for me. In my career at AID I had always felt like I was an imposter, especially when dealing with someone like Larry Saiers, a brilliant economist, who was the genius behind many of the economic reform programs we had been doing.

I felt I had huge knowledge deficits. I'd never taken an economics course. So, the good thing for me about the Harvard experience was the substance. I got to do a lot of economics and really felt like I finally had some substantive understanding that would enable me to be a more effective interlocutor with people on those kinds of issues.

Q: Okay. Was this at the Kennedy School or—

NORTH: It was.

Q: So, did this work in terms of keeping you in USAID? I think it did.

NORTH: It did. I came back and was based in Washington and ended up—Monica Sinding and Paul White recruited me to go into the East Asia office of the Asia bureau.

AID/W, Asia Bureau/East Asia Office, Deputy Director, 1991-1993

Q: Oh. I didn't realize that. Huh. So, you continued in Washington then—

NORTH: Well, it wasn't for long. By the time I actually got back, Monica announced her retirement. Linda Morris became the director of that office, and I was the deputy. Linda was an amazingly gifted, inspirational person to work with. I really, really enjoyed and learned so much from her. Just an amazing lady. And she too died all too young as you probably know.

Q: Right.

NORTH: So, I came back and worked with her and some other great colleagues. And then after one or two years Ethiopia suddenly opened up.

Q: Right. So, Ethiopia opened up after the change, when Meles became president in 1991.

NORTH: Right, right. So, Bill Pearson was then the director and it still was a small-scale place. And he had been there for several years. He asked me to come out and be the deputy director. That worked out and I had another terrific boss. I have been so lucky in that lane.

Even better, my wife agreed to do it. So, that was sort of the critical point in terms of when I would have left AID but didn't. So, I went back to Ethiopia.

I think you can imagine how excited I was at the prospect of going back at a time when it looked like things were finally going to get a lot better. Meles Zenawi, another one of those African renaissance figures, right, was doing a lot of great things and he welcomed American engagement.

Our job was finally to put in place a large mission to get development moving in Ethiopia. Bill was ending up his tour. Marge Bonner was the new director and she was also great and energetic. She had a lot of great ideas, was really focused on management, best development practices and knew how to work the system. She had come from the Africa Bureau Program Office (DP) and had worked in the Africa bureau. Of course, as with many well intentioned AID initiatives we soon ran into a lot of issues. The resources were never as robust as we hoped and we got caught spending a lot of time on the kinds of internal things that really distract from the job. Things like Agency reorganizations, budget zig zags, downsizing and new HR practices. In many ways the Clinton era was not a good time for development. Nonetheless, we attracted really talented staff who shared our commitment to the country and wanted to get stuff up and running.

USAID/Ethiopia, Deputy Mission Director, 1993 - 1996

Q: Right. Right. So, this really was a very optimistic time then in Ethiopia and the program was expanding, as I suspect, relatively dramatically as you all were designing new programs. And Meles, I always heard was relatively—was quite engaged personally in a lot of discussions about what kind of development programs AID would be funding. Were you ever in any meetings with Meles himself to talk about these programs?

NORTH: I was in meetings with him but not to talk about our work directly. I met him several times when I was the control officer for Jimmy Carter. A bit weird. But really interesting.

The Mission did have several direct lines of access. We had a bit of an unusual adjunct structure in Addis, largely due to the leadership of State AFR under Susan Rice and the role of Dick McCall in AID. (Dick had been a former long time and influential hill staffer.). They wanted to capitalize on what they saw as this renaissance and openings for conflict resolution.

So, Bill was the director, but there was a regional operation led by Gayle Smith. She worked closely with our DG advisor, also a former hill staffer. They focused on the African renaissance and the idea that these four guys in East Africa, Meles, Isaias in Eritrea, Paul Kagame in Rwanda and Museveni in Uganda, were the new future, one which is going to be open, democratic, inclusive and great. Gayle was somewhat independent and reported back to Dick McCall in Washington. She and Steve had a lot of

access to Meles and his team. And they travelled in the region extensively but were based in Addis.

Q: She was a personal services contractor reporting to USAID Chief of Staff, Dick McCall. But, she was living in Addis?

NORTH: In Addis, correct. And so—

Q: Was Steve Morrison also there in Addis?

NORTH: He was. He was the democracy and governance advisor.

Q: Oh, in the AID mission?

NORTH: Yes.

He is a thoughtful guy and serious. He had a lot of connectivity to people because he'd been a political person, a political staffer on the Hill. He was given a lot of space to work in. So, many of the highest level discussions about development, politics and the program happened between Gayle and Meles. But the mission had extensive space to craft a new strategy and get a suite of programs up and running in agriculture, education, health, democracy and governance and food for peace resilience efforts. We also had a state-of-the-art Famine Early System.

Q: Right. And I know that Marge was involved in at least some of those on the agriculture front at least—

NORTH: Yes. It was always this thing that people liked to dance around. Marge did a magnificent job of managing it.

Q: So, you said you were in meetings with Jimmy Carter and Meles. How did Jimmy Carter get involved? Was he involved with the renaissance leaders and the Greater Horn of Africa Initiative that had been initiated by USAID Administrator, Brian Atwood? Or was it related to the work by the billionaire Japanese fellow with whom Carter worked?

NORTH: He was helping the Sasakawa Foundation on agriculture, doing work on river blindness and encouraging democratic opening.

The first time I met him he flew in on a private jet courtesy of Merck. Merck was providing the drug used to eradicate river blindness.

Q: So, when Jimmy Carter was meeting with Meles, what was he focused on? What kinds of discussions? You said it wasn't particularly about development. What were they talking about?

NORTH: They were talking a lot about development, including the onchocerciasis program, but mostly they focused on geopolitical issues.

Q: East Africa-related or more general? Because Meles saw himself playing a role in the broader region, right?

NORTH: He did. Meles was a very, very impressive guy. But he was not a democrat. Small D.

Q: Yeah, small D, right. Wasn't he doing a degree at LSE (London School of Economics) or somewhere else in the UK? Virtual, I assume.

NORTH: He did a long-distance course. He was a brilliant student.

Q: So, you mentioned that he wasn't a small D democrat. Were there ever discussions ***with*** *him about the democratic evolution of the country?*

NORTH: Yes, there were. I didn't have them, but others did. The new government was going to hold elections. Meles had a vision for resolving ethnic tensions in Ethiopia by carving things up into ethnic regions and devolving certain powers. It was controversial then and the legacy is controversial now. So they set many new regional based structures in various parts of the country like for the Amharas, Tigreans, the Oromo and many other smaller ones for a variety of groups in the south. Meles' government was dominated by Tigreans so there was always a lot of suspicion about motives. And the lift to do elections in the wake of the war in a country with very poor infrastructure and state capacity was a heavy one. Steve Morrison spent a lot of time with key advisors to Meles, talking about those kinds of issues. We provided a lot of assistance to the different institutions that were setting those up and also assistance in writing a constitution, a new constitution.

Those were exciting times because everything was in play and things were being developed and happening, a lot of energy, a lot of engagement, bringing people in to do stuff.

Q: Okay. So, as I recall, the program and mission grew quite significantly during that period?

NORTH: It did.

Q: Were there any parts of the program that you thought were particularly interesting or that you yourself got heavily involved with, trying to conceptualize and move forward?

NORTH: Well, we had a lot of ambition so—do you remember a guy named Marty Hanratty? He was our ag economist and he was really seized with figuring out how to help Ethiopia become food self-sufficient. Sasakawa like investments were part of that – basically introducing new technologies, including access to things like fertilizer, pesticides, better storage and improved seeds. But a big part was investing in connective

infrastructure like roads. Jimmy Carter felt this was going to be transformative but, as you know, technology alone is usually not sufficient to achieve those kinds of transformations. But Marty was really trying to nudge the government towards a more private sector led approach. Remember, the Dergue had collectivized agriculture and seized farmers' land.

Part of the concept was embraced by the new Government. Road construction was a big focus. But unravelling the collectivization was more complicated. Meles came from a rebel group that espoused many of the economic ideas implemented by the Dergue and he totally resisted the idea of giving individual farmers any kind of title to their land. Not so much push back on introducing new technologies, improving technologies, getting things like agricultural irrigation where it was feasible and that sort of thing. But the idea that peasants could own their own land, that you could rely on private sector actors to move and sell inputs and outputs and didn't need price controls was never accepted fully.

In part this was well intentioned and understandable. After the wars and famines food security was their chief preoccupation. They wanted a guarantee that all of their people would have enough to eat. For them the best way to do that was still a state dominated approach.

Q: So, there were discussions with him about land reform and land titling, but they were not interested, they wanted to maintain the system as it was?

NORTH: It wasn't that they weren't interested, it was that they had a different perspective. More of a welfare-dominated perspective. The equity dimensions trumped the efficiency considerations. So, food production was one lane that was hugely important to us. In part that was because we were still providing massive amounts of emergency assistance. And our Food for Peace officer ultimately became Mike Harvey. If you know Mike. It was a great mission.

Another major lane was democracy and governance. I mentioned Steve but it wasn't just him and elections. We were working with the new parliament, working with the judiciary, working with local governments trying to create new institutions that could be democratic, independent and effective. That was cool. I enjoyed that work and being involved in that work.

The health area, reproductive health especially, was an immense challenge. Ethiopia was so disadvantaged in terms of reproductive health, so far behind peers in any health dimension. Basically, there was no functioning public health system outside Addis. It was like starting from ground zero. No facilities, shortages of trained staff, weak to non-existent logistical systems – the problems were immense and the solutions were going to take decades to really deliver. That time lag was such a frustration. We knew what could be done but building the delivery vehicle was not an overnight project. And seeing the human costs of delayed action was heartbreaking. Women were especially damaged by this, their agency was constrained and their lives were often very short. Our health professionals, in this case led by Victor Barbiero, another Ethiopia Peace Corps

alumni, knew this but kept working to do what we could. We started to put in place some excellent programs with some outstanding colleagues on the Ethiopian side.

Another area where we had similar kinds of challenges was education. And Marge's husband, Ron Bonner, was so amazingly effective at creating solutions and avenues of progress. He too had worked in Ethiopia before, as had Marge, and he was so gifted and had the good luck to work with an amazing female Minister of Education, Weizero Genet. There have been huge payoffs from those programs. Less so in terms of economic growth, agriculture and DG (Democracy and Governance). stuff but in health, education and food security investments like the famine early warning system we put in place some building blocks which really have worked over time.

Q: Have worked over time. Right, that's a good marker to put down.

You had mentioned Dick McCall. Did Dick come out frequently to see you all?

NORTH: I don't really remember him visiting frequently. I think I saw him more in Washington.

Q: Okay.

NORTH: Another thing that Ethiopia had that was great were our wonderful FSNs (Foreign Service Nationals). They had lived through tough times and had to deal with horrible stuff but they were well-educated, dedicated, really effective and helped to make it happen.

Q: Yes. I should add that we just—they've just posted an oral history interview by this FSN in the education office who worked with Ron Bonner, Tassew Zewdie.

So, you had at this point had been in and out of Ethiopia for nearly twenty years.

NORTH: Right.

Q: And this was a positive period.

NORTH: That was the height.

Q: This was the height of your experience with Ethiopia. (Laughs)

NORTH: That was the height. It really was. I mean, another triumph of hope over experience.

Q: Right. So, when did you leave Ethiopia as deputy director? And is that when you went to Zambia?

NORTH: It is.

Q: So, when did you go to Zambia?

NORTH: I think it was 1996.

Q: So, had the war with Eritrea begun before you left? Had the friendship between Meles and Isaias already begun to break down?

NORTH: No, but the two countries were not friendly. This was one of the ongoing talking points in the Carter/Meles discussions. Relations went south very soon after '91. We set up and for a while managed a sub-office in Eritrea but they were even less interested in opening up politically or economically than the Tigreans were.

Q: Was it difficult because the Eritreans were difficult to work with?

NORTH: That was a big part of it. We didn't really know what we wanted to do given the tough posture of their new government. There were some personnel issues and someone had to be pulled out. A lot of unfortunate factors.

Q: Right. Did you have any contact with Isaias during that period?

NORTH: I never did. I certainly heard a lot about him from people who met him regularly.

Q: Okay. Did Gayle Smith help with any of this, setting up an AID mission in Eritrea?

NORTH: You know, that's interesting. I'm sure she was involved in discussions. I don't really have any memories of her being actively involved in it. At that point she was spending a lot of time traveling around the region.

Q: Yeah. She was probably doing more of the Greater Horn of Africa stuff.

NORTH: Yes. The Greater Horn of Africa Initiative was starting to take shape.

Q: Okay. Ethiopia was a growing program, very high-profile vis-à-vis Washington and also presumably the State Department was quite interested and folks in the embassy. How were the relations with State and the embassy? As I recall, David Shinn might have been the East Africa office director.

NORTH: He was at some point but was the ambassador when Marge was there, for part of her tenure.

Q: Okay. So, what were relations like with State generically and with the embassy and was there pretty much commonality on approach?

NORTH: David was an expert on East Africa. He had a deep understanding of the region. Unfortunately, that is not something you always see in leadership. The Ambassadorial appointment system is one which does not always seem to give regional knowledge a premium. He knew a lot and was very careful about expectations and management. He was respectful of our technical judgment in the areas we were engaged in except perhaps in the DG arena. There was more engagement by the embassy in the DG stuff. I think that's understandable. And actually—do you remember Rick Olson?

Q: I know the name, yeah.

NORTH: Yes. Unfortunately, his career didn't end well. But he was the political officer at that point and he was—both he and his wife were—great officers. I'd say at the embassy level there were very good working relations. That spirit continued with David's successor Irv Hicks.

Q: Given the access that the mission had to Meles and other senior officials, were there ever tensions with the embassy about that? You know, in some countries there are and some there are not.

NORTH: Yes. Sure. There were. Thankfully, although I can't speak for others, I felt everyone was pretty adult-like.

It was a bit awkward with Gayle there in a semi-political role with a lot of political backing in DC. We figured out ways to work with it. I think that was true for other country teams in the region. But, obviously, that might not have been easy for some.

Q: Right. Did it result in AID doing a lot of reporting, cables and things like that? I ask because I think that's something that AID probably should do much more of, given its perspective from the contacts it has and from its field trips and stuff. Did that happen in Ethiopia? Did AID add to the general understanding by the USG of Ethiopia?

NORTH: Yes. Especially on the food aid side. There continued to be rolling food shortages in certain parts of the country. and needs for that. Similarly, we did a lot of reporting on the DG side and also on international relations where we would have some equities because of what was going on in border areas.

Q: Anything else about Ethiopia? Let me ask, on the management side, as the deputy director, how did you and the Mission Director divide up the responsibilities?

NORTH: Well, you know, Marge is so well organized, so deliberate and thoughtful. She walks the talk of growing and empowering staff. Really encouraging to people to help them with their careers and to help them grow, to help them become better workers, effective managers and just open to sharing everything, so it was pretty easy. In the areas that I was more interested in she was willing to give me more responsibility. DG was one of those and ag was the other. She had a system of regular engagement with the different

offices and did a lot of work on staff strengthening and putting in place new systems for a new and growing mission.

Q: Right because this was also the period of AID reengineering and all of that change

NORTH: It was. Fortunately for us, mostly it was background noise in Ethiopia. But not completely.

I remember I had to write an EER (Employee Evaluation Report) for someone and felt that the new system damaged their career. I've always regretted that.

Q: What—can you explain? I'm not sure I understand.

NORTH: You were supposed to rank people within a mission and there were limits. Very arbitrary.

Q: Yes. You mentioned that you did a lot on the DG front. If, in retrospect, given that you're such a thoughtful person, is there anything you would have done differently on the democracy governance front, knowing what you know now?

NORTH: I might have been less invested in hoping it was all going to work out the way it didn't.

Q: (Laughs) Okay. That's fair.

NORTH: This was post 1989. It seemed like it was going to be a new world. Should we have known better and resisted the catnip. I don't know. I felt that kind of remorse again in the wake of what happened in Iraq/Afghanistan.

Q: Right. Okay. So, you were there as the deputy for how many years? For three or four years?

NORTH: I guess four, four years. 1992 to 1996 and then went to Zambia.

Q: Okay. And you had gotten married before you went out and you've briefly alluded a couple of times to this. Was your wife working there?

NORTH: She did. She ended up working at the Armor Hanson Research Institute. She's a medical doctor and she figured something out for Ethiopia.

Q: Right. Because we need to mention this in each one of your posts because that's not an easy career to accommodate, I would imagine.

NORTH: No, and that was why I was looking for a way out earlier.

Q: Right.

NORTH: Ethiopia was the first time that she lived overseas. She was doing interesting research. It turned out that she enjoyed living overseas. That's a simplification but—

Q: (Laughs) Okay. So, she made some sacrifices for that.

NORTH: She made a lot of sacrifices.
I mean, basically she had a promising career in medical research. She'd worked at NIH (National Institutes of Health), at Stanford, at Johns Hopkins and I took her to Ethiopia. So, not a good thing for her career.

Q: Okay, well we won't dwell on that.

So, you obviously did a great job as the deputy director in Ethiopia because then the bureau asked you to become the mission director in Zambia.

NORTH: That's one theory. (Peasley laughs) I don't necessarily buy that but yes, I did get the chance to go to Zambia.

Q: And was this—did the bureau reach out to you and say, "Here are some options and what would you like?" or how did it happen, do you recall?

NORTH: I don't remember. There must have been some kind of discussion and application process. I don't think I said, "I want to go to Zambia." I really didn't know much about southern Africa.
One ambassador wanted me to be their DCM (Deputy Chief of Mission). But that fizzled out.

Q: In Ethiopia?

NORTH: In Ethiopia. In part because I knew a lot about Ethiopia and knew a lot of key Ethiopians.

Q: So, when you left Ethiopia did you leave feeling foreboding or did you feel optimistic? I mean, you sort of alluded to this, that you wished you hadn't been so optimistic that I'm wondering when you left were you still feeling optimistic about the future or?

NORTH: I think I was feeling good that some of our programs were up and running, that we were starting to see some impacts and could show results. Those are good things, but I never believed that it was a magical renaissance moment.

I always had qualms about that. I was never comfortable espousing that theory. I thought it was too facile a moniker for these situations that were so complex. Yet I get it that maybe we need to find ways to have a narrative that people can understand and support.

But the tendencies of the 4 ‘renaissance’ leaders were already clear by the time I left. Meles was not a small D democrat.

Q: Right. President Clinton made his trip to Africa, his first trip in 1998, I believe, so that would have been when you were in Zambia.

NORTH: Right.

Q: But even as late as 1998, I mean, there were papers floating around about the renaissance leaders of Africa.

NORTH: And to some extent things were moving in better directions in Africa. By then it was clear that the economic reform programs and the democratization sweep had legs. Things were changing. There was much more human capacity on the part of the Africans to take the leadership.

I was always happy to see Africa getting more attention and always deeply believed that Africa warrants our attention, that these countries and their situations are important, not just for the Africans and themselves but for us. So, in that sense I was ambivalent about the renaissance. I did want to see more resources, I did want to see more attention. And I believed the Africans had more of an ability to use those resources.

Q: Yes. But you thought there was some naïveté in identifying these leaders or not recognizing what their shortcomings were?

NORTH: Well, yes, given the fact that none of them gave up.

Q: Right, okay. Enough.

NORTH: So, zero for four.

USAID/Zambia, Mission Director, 1996 - 2000

Q: Yeah, right. Okay. So, you went to Zambia in 1996. How were things in Zambia at that point in time?

NORTH: Well. This takes me back to a footnote from my days in East Africa in DC at the end of the eighties. We had a debriefing on HIV-AIDS in Rwanda at some point. I can’t remember exactly when. Maybe around 1986. But at the end of it I will never forget Steve Mintz’s reaction. He said, “So, this basically means that hundreds of thousands of people are going to die.” This turned out to be a huge understatement.

At that point no one was really doing anything about it. And maybe they couldn’t have done anything terribly effective about it in the mid-eighties, late-eighties.

After East Africa I went to Ethiopia. HIV AIDS in the Ethiopian context wasn't yet a salient issue because, in part, Ethiopia was so isolated and so backward and so under-resourced.

When I went to Zambia in 1996 this was a country that was in an amazingly awful situation. The plague was inescapable. Whether it was the cemeteries by the side of the road, the large number of funerals, or the people in your office dying suddenly or being absent, not being present. Everywhere it was the elephant in the room, and no one was really doing anything about it.

Q: Did you have any kind of an HIV/AIDS program in Zambia at that point in time when you went?

NORTH: We did. We had a very good program; it was quite robust. We had a gifted health officer, Paul Hartenburger. There was a fabulous but prickly health minister, Katele Kalumba. He, Paul and other donors had crafted a country owned health sector reform program. In concept it was a model of what such a program might be. It got a lot of donor buy-in. A great idea.

A key element of it was HIV-AIDS focused but not enough of one. There was still—there was so much denial around it in places like Zambia. The Christian church, traditional practices and denial about sexual practices and human behavior delayed or stopped addressing the issue. But we did have a health program.

Q: Yes—so you were dealing with it but just not at the scale that was needed?

NORTH: Yeah, right.

Q: And it was probably mostly focused on prevention, I think, in those days.

NORTH: Right. When I arrived in Zambia it was just after Kenneth Kaunda had left office. They were in the midst of their transition to a new leader after decades of Kuanda. F. Chiluba was to become the new President. He turned out to be another disappointment. But, there had been a peaceful transition. In part this was due to deft diplomacy by our country team in nudging Kuanda to accept the outcome.

Q: Right. Right.

NORTH: It was an open election, and we were doing a lot of stuff there with new institutions of government. We had a democracy and governance program that was quite good.

The other thing I should say, this is sort of striking to me in retrospect, was when I got assigned to Lusaka, Joe Stepanek was the director and the bureau invited me—Joe invited me to come down and take a look at what I was going to be coming into. So, I went from Ethiopia and went to Harare and I had never—I had been to Nairobi but I had never

been—and I'd been to Tanzania and Madagascar, Uganda, so East Africa, but I had never been to Southern Africa.

In 1996, when I landed in Harare, it was like landing in Phoenix compared to Ethiopia. I just had no idea that there could be some place with that kind of infrastructure in Africa. And I was stunned. And Lusaka, to some extent less robustly so, had similar kinds of vestiges of the British colonial experience and some of the toxic legacies associated with that in terms of ownership of land by the white minorities and exploitation of mineral resources in the Copper Belt and so on and so forth.

Q: Yes. I remember during that period I was in Washington and attending a lot of consultative group meetings. Zambia was always one of my favorite ones to go to because the Zambians were different. They were feistier than some of the other countries. And I'm wondering what it was like working with Zambian officialdom from your perspective.

NORTH: It was a lot of fun. I didn't really deal with Chiluba. We had some good ambassadors and even they didn't have a lot of interaction with him, but they had some. I dealt a little bit with Kaunda in terms of trying to coax him to stay in retirement and accept the aftermath of this loss.

But there were charming rogues like Kitele and the Finance Minister Ronald Penza. He was doing a lot of good stuff. There was a major effort to get government out of business ownership and management with a major privatization program, including the mines. There were a lot of personalities there and they were good to deal with. But there was this strong undercurrent of kleptocracy.

Thankfully, there wasn't the kind of violence, state violence that you saw in Ethiopia. And maybe again because Zambia has no predominant ethnic group people tend to get along with each other. Maybe the Christianization of the space helped. I don't know. In Malawi, I think, you had some of the same post-Banda, you had similar kinds of—

Q: Right. But Malawians are much less feisty than the Zambians. When the donors would be hard on the Zambians, they'd give the donors a bad time, poke at the donors, pointing out corruption or issues in our countries. So, they would kind of give it back to us a little bit, which I always appreciated. (Laughs)

NORTH: Yes. A lot more fun.

Q: So, going back to HIV-AIDS, didn't Kenneth Kaunda's son die of AIDS; was that while you were there? I've heard that when he finally came out and spoke about what his son died of, that was a very important moment.

NORTH: I don't remember if I was there then. I do remember that story. I don't think you can have a society suffer such deaths at such a scale and not ultimately have some kind of reckoning. Things slowly started to get done better and more effectively, although

effective treatments were still not widely available or affordable. And we were constrained mostly to prevention.

Q: Do you recall having discussions with Washington about that?

NORTH: Yes. Mostly it wasn't me. After Paul Hartenburger we got another great health officer, Robert Clay. Ken Yamashita was in South Africa and we had some great colleagues in Zimbabwe. We put in place a regional program for working with truck drivers, to try to reduce transmission in that population. And then, we started agitating a bit about doing something for the FSN staff because we were—you know, our FSN staff were living there, they're exposed to this, they were suffering, and we weren't doing anything to help them. So, that was a discussion that we had and started and ultimately, I think, things got better but not quick enough.

Q: Did those discussions involve the embassy as well in trying to do something at post to be more proactive?

NORTH: Yes. Arlene Render was one of our ambassadors. She's a wonderful, feisty, take no prisoners kind of person. And she was really, really alive to these kinds of issues for our FSNs. She always treated them with the dignity that they deserved to be treated with and was an effective champion on those kinds of issues.

Q: Right. You mentioned the health sector program. Were you also doing any economic policy reform programs at that point in time?

NORTH: Yes. Yes, we were. It was a smaller mission. Joe Stepanek was an economist and he was good at sort of doing that kind of program. We were focused on agricultural liberalization and privatization. We had an ag office that was working on those kinds of issues and also some environmental stuff. The major privatization push was waning during my tenure but we still provided some technical assistance. Then there was a small education program and DG. So, we weren't as significantly doing economic reform per se. I think the Zambians had had an AID incentive econ reform program in the past. We were definitely active in the Consultative Group process. I worked closely with a group of donors called the Like Minded. We focused a lot on those issues and tried to improve donor coordination. We had some success on economic issues but even better luck on health sector reform.

Q: Was the health sector program an example of both program assistance and project assistance? Did you do budget support?

NORTH: Yes

Q: Was that the only one of those hybrid programs you had at post?

NORTH: Yes it was.

A lot of good people worked on that with a lot of Zambians to try to create something that was going to be effective.

Q: Right. And you mentioned donor coordination briefly. Was it effective in Zambia?

NORTH: Yes, especially on health care.

Q: And I assume that the Brits had a large program there?

NORTH: They didn't have a large program, but they had a presence. I'd say the Scandinavians had larger programs for some reason, maybe the Kaunda thing. But the Danes, the Swedes, the Norwegians were really active.

Q: Did Zambia have any Southern African regional programs?

NORTH: Yes, we did a lot of work on trade liberalization. There was a regional economic organization there. (COMESA) Southern Africa was ripe for that kind of integration.

Q: Okay, so COMESA was there. Did you have any involvement with it?

NORTH: Yes I did. Lusaka—in terms of donors and stuff - it's a small town. So we had a lot to do with COMESA and helped them to access services from AID's regional programs.

Q: Did you see it as an effective organization?

NORTH: I think to the extent it focused on trade and trade facilitation, yes. They had some great people, especially some Zimbabweans that I remember running into. They were really topflight.

Q: Okay. Were you doing anything in the Copper Belt region of Zambia?

NORTH: The health sector program was up there. And privatization of the copper mines was a big focus.

The big issue for us in agriculture was fertilizer subsidies and trying to find a way to manage them affordably and equitably. Trying to be impactful in terms of food production and incomes for small farmers.

Q: That is interesting because that was always an issue in Malawi. Was that ever discussed among the mission directors in the region. There was a lot of dogma related to the issue and yet, it was much more complex and I always felt that the complexity never got addressed very well.

NORTH: I think that's a really good assessment. It was not a simple issue. I don't remember ever having discussed it at our occasional regional directors' meetings.

I do remember talking about HIV-AIDS and the angst and agony that all of us felt about living with the problem and feeling like we weren't doing as much as we should.

Q: Yes. Were you and Washington on the same wavelength? I mean, you were running a good development program, and you felt you were supported by the embassy and Washington? Or were there ever issues or policy differences?

NORTH: We had good support. But Zambia and other neighboring states were always going to be overshadowed by South Africa.

Q: Right, because you were there shortly after Mandela was elected in South Africa; it garnered most of the attention.

NORTH: And then, Zimbabwe became another problem child. Mozambique would intermittently pop up with issues.

Q: Because so much money was going into South Africa during this period, Brian Atwood wanted AID to demonstrate that we cared about the broader region, not just South Africa. He therefore began the Initiative for Southern Africa that expanded the regional program and established a new regional platform in Botswana. Did the Zambians feel that South Africa was getting all the attention? Did they recognize the broader regional efforts, just out of curiosity?

NORTH: I don't remember them publicly talking about that. But I'm sure that's got to have been in their heads. They were one of the front line states during the struggle for majority rule in South Africa and had hosted many ANC leaders. They had also unsuccessfully tried to reorient their trade to Tanzania. They had a Chinese built rail line to Dar which was a white elephant.

Regardless of the history of South Africa, given the scale of their economy in the region and the reach of their investments, they were always going to be central to land locked Zambia's future. The supermarkets in Zambia were owned by South African business interests. The mines, not only by South African business interests, but many of them by South African types.

Q: Right. Those South African grocery stores, I assume, didn't emerge until after the change in South Africa, correct? Zambia might not have allowed those grocery stores at an earlier time.

NORTH: That's a good question. I think they were there before. But I don't know.

Q: Because Zambia was always one of the toughest frontline states. Obviously, Malawi was not. (Laughs)

On the DG front, Chiluba had defeated Kaunda. Kaunda left office, as you mentioned. Were we continuing to do DG/democracy programming after that initial election and transition?

NORTH: We were doing all kinds of stuff. Alternative mediation, alternative dispute resolution was one channel. Working with different people in the judiciary system. A little bit of dialogue on things like elections and elections management. No work with parliament that I remember.

Q: Were we doing anything with media at all? Or was the media in Zambia relatively free and open?

NORTH: It was relatively free and open but small. There wasn't a lot. And we had a pretty good—it was still then USIS (United States Information Service), I guess, their office that did some work with media.

Q: Were we doing anything on natural resources management, which obviously is a big sector in much of Southern Africa?

NORTH: Yes, we were. We had a great program, working adjacent to national parks to try to create sustainable practices to enable local people to live there but also to reap some benefits from the environmental services that existed. In some cases, hunting, in other cases other products.

Q: Tourism, I think, eventually became an even more important income stream for Zambia, I would assume.

NORTH: It was important even then but it was a small base and a limited number of properties. Fantastic settings but getting to them was hard, except for Victoria Falls.

Zambia's real economic asset had been mineral wealth and some commercial farming. The rip and ship thing. Mining was always boom and bust with wildly fluctuating product prices internationally. That and political risk distorted incentives for new investment, maintenance of mines and regard for worker safety. After privatization there was a buzz around restoring degraded sites and some of that sort of thing did end up happening. There were also efforts to get new commercial farming projects but that was complicated because most of that would be white South African money and accessing local land at scale was not easy.

Q: You had mentioned the minister of health who later became minister of finance. He was a very charismatic fellow — I wonder what it was like working with a physician as minister of finance?

NORTH: Katele Kalumba?
Yes. He required special handling. Very sensitive. And sometimes hard to keep him focused on substantive issues.

Q: Is there anything more that you want to say on Zambia today? What did you think worked best there that AID was doing? Or the converse?

NORTH: In Zambia we were very fortunate to have partners who were very capable. Zambia had frayed, degraded systems but there was a skeleton, unlike Ethiopia. Kaunda's rule had been a gentle form of authoritarianism and there had been no conflict.

Another contrast to Ethiopia was the ongoing presence and influence of the Christian churches and their mission infrastructure. A lot of essential services were partially outsourced to missions. Education and health for example. And the churches were very influential in setting a tone around public issues. For the good around questions of transparency and more mixed as HIV/AIDS emerged.

There was also a shared memory in the elite of the late colonial period when there had been a copper boom and the copper belt was highly developed around the mines with good jobs, good services and available goods. Not sustained but a memory.

And in agriculture there had been some white commercial farming in the colonial period but never to the extent of a Zimbabwe. That essentially took land off the political agenda which was helpful.

So, as I said, unlike in Ethiopia you didn't feel that you were building from scratch. In Zambia there was something there. It had been allowed to decay. It had fallen apart. But you would go out and you would just meet these people who had been educated and trained and knew what to do. They didn't have the resources to do it and they weren't being paid decent wages but there was a critical mass of knowledge. They were also mostly open to allowing markets to work.

Basically, we were breathing new life into what they wanted to do in a long term way that was sustainable. That was the heart of the health sector reform effort. I think that was a worthwhile thing to work on, whether—

Q: Were we able to do this sector work in a way that got their input, so we were in fact supporting their efforts, as identified by them?

NORTH: These were really well-trained health professionals we were working with. They had clear ideas about what it would take, they just weren't supported by the system in terms of resources.

I'd say we had less success in agriculture. And the DG stuff was useful but not systematically impactful, partly because of scale. In education, I really wanted to do more because there were similar vibes of home grown aspiration. There was a lot of capacity to accept and use aid effectively. However, the bureau wasn't able to be really supportive of education.

The environmental stuff was nice. It may have helped protect habitat and wildlife, but the poaching and ag land use pressures were significant.

Q: Okay. But it was smaller. And agriculture was not effective because the institutions and the people were weaker in that sector?

NORTH: That and the complex political economy of fertilizer.

Q: Right; there were some fundamental policy issues. That's an interesting prism to look through when developing a new strategy—looking more in depth at the institutions and people and focusing on those areas where you can have the most impact. I suspect we don't do that as often as we should.

NORTH: Well, hard to do when you have all these directives.

Q: (Laughs) Indeed.

NORTH: And then there are the flavors of the day with each administration. I mentioned I worked in the East Asia office before I went back to Ethiopia. It was then called the Asia Private Enterprise Bureau and Henrietta Holsman Fore was the head of it. You know, really?

Q: (Laughs) Ah, well. Yes, we are a funny organization, and there are some interesting twists.

NORTH: So, given that baggage, it's reassuring and amazing that anything gets done effectively.

Q: Right. Let's go back because we didn't really talk about your East Asia experience. Was there anything during the year or two that you picked up that were valuable for you when you then came back into the Africa bureau? I suspect there was a lot of private sector and economic growth work.

NORTH: I always thought of myself as a child of the Africa bureau because of the Ethiopia thing. Working on all of Asia from Washington was interesting and weird. Even though I'd been an IDI in Indonesia and worked in South Asia, I got exposure to new challenges. Initially, it was hard to get my head into it, in part because I had just overdosed on economic and policy training at Harvard, much focused on reform case studies from across the world, but also because in most of Asia state capacity and development metrics were so much better than in most of Africa. That always makes me wonder about our value added.

Q: Right.

NORTH: However, from a management perspective that office was a huge gift. Our DAA was the delightful George Laudato. A very bright light and lots of fun. We had fantastic

staff. Folks like Donna Stauffer, and the guys working on Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. And Linda was such a great leader and person. She let me do a lot of interesting things.

One of the most exciting was opening our mission in Mongolia after it became free. I got my first exposure to the India program where Walter Bollinger was a director who was showing how we still might make strong contributions even when we had great partners who were making a lot of progress.

I went to Mindanao and looked at the conflict situation down there and worked a bit on base re-negotiations and an emergency response to a volcanic eruption. Malcolm Butler was the mission director in the Philippines.

I'm not sure I added the kind of value that I think maybe I added in the Ethiopian emergency context. In the Asia job most of the real work was happening in our missions. Washington's contribution murkier.

An argument to the contrary might be Mike Feinstein and Kathryn Boyd – both GS and both incredibly impactful in their lanes. Mike's was Cambodia and Kathyrn's was Indonesia. Both were perfect examples of civil servant employees who knew a lot about the county they worked on, knew how to get things done in DC, knew how to support their missions and pushed important efforts.

Q: Since we're now at 11:29 and we have a hard stop at 11:30 why don't we stop.

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Q: Today is March 6, 2024, and this is interview number three with Walter North.

And Walter, when we finished up last time we had talked about Zambia. You were finishing up your four years in Zambia in 2000. How did the process go about coming up with your next assignment? How much was your initiative, how much were people reaching out to you?

USAID/India Mission Director, 2000 - 2005

NORTH: Well, as with so many other inflection points in my engagement with AID, it was a combination of factors. I had long thought that I should retire as soon as I became eligible to retire, which would have been at the end of the Zambia assignment. I thought that would give me enough time for a new career and help my wife continue working in medicine. But my wife had really gotten interested in Zambia and not just her medical research, more about the culture, and the richness of the lived experience there and the diversity of cultures that existed there. Linda Morse, who was the director in India and who had been my former boss, reached out and asked, "Would you be interested in coming to India?"

While I love India, the decider to try to get the job was actually my wife. She was really interested in going to India. Ultimately I got the assignment. I had traveled there in an official capacity when Walter Bollinger was the mission director in the early nineties.

And you know, Owen Cylke had also been there as Director and he had really retrofitted the program just as India was starting to open up its economy. Walter built on that as did Linda. Of course, the bilateral political relationship with India was seldom easy.

The context was overwhelming and fascinating. Around a billion people. Vast in size. Huge diversity, extensive abject poverty and democratic. Our resources were limited and our operations were constrained by both of our bureaucracies. The poverty issues were exacerbated by huge social discrimination and inequality - sexual violence, sectarian tensions, the impact of the caste system, food insecurity, et cetera.

A lot of the strains in the relationship with the U.S. were a byproduct of the Cold War. Some were rooted in deep Indian sensitivities to outsiders and the colonial experience. They had suspicions about the motives of donors, which in many senses was legitimate and well-founded.

In the 1960's massive aid supported investments in higher education that led to the development of the Indian Institutes of Technology that became a big driver of economic and other reforms later, as well as an incubator of talent for Silicon valley. And similar catalytic investments like new rice and wheat varieties stimulated huge increases in food production, if not in overall better nutrition. American food aid had been and continued to be a safety net for the poor. Reproductive health investments started to take root.

Those investments had foundered with some of the bilateral tensions but had continued, albeit at more modest levels and with fewer transformational payoffs.

After the end of the cold war and, with the onset of the Manmohan Singh economic reform program, Owen and Walter had reshaped our engagement. We sustained a massive reproductive health initiative in northern India and a more modest food aid program with CARE and CRS. Then they started shifting the focus to partnering with. the Government on economic reform, energy sector reform, science and technology innovation and the like. It was really interesting and small investments had big payoffs.

Embedded in that pivot was a push to encourage two way high-tech connectivity between a lot of highly educated Indians and Americans, including many diaspora compatriots.

All of these kinds of positive developments and others in our relationship had improved things to the point that Bill Clinton made a visit near the end of Linda's tenure. However, that high point was hugely set back by the Indian's exploding a nuclear device at Pokhran.

That had really ticked off the administration and the U.S. government. That was the context I was coming into. Our Ambassador was a very gifted former politician, a guy

named Dick Celeste, the Clinton appointee ambassador in Delhi. He had done so much to improve the relationship, to get Clinton to visit and it all was in limbo after the test.

Q: And he had been a Peace Corps volunteer there too, hadn't he?

NORTH: No. He was a really interesting man. He went to Yale and somehow had a relationship with Chester Bowles, a fellow Eli and a former Democratic Governor of Connecticut. Bowles was the Ambassador to India. Dick went out as his staff aide just after he graduated from Yale.

Q: Right.

NORTH: The Peace Corps was in India when Dick was there. And there was a whole cohort of people of his age who had been captivated by India, including Dick. He was lucky enough to get a chance to come back many years later. He was an extraordinarily gracious guy, very thoughtful. He knew India and loved India. He made a lot of progress in improving relations.

He had gone out with high expectations and had done a lot but at the end of his assignment was disappointed. He was there when I arrived.

Q: So, you arrived in the summer or early fall of 2000, so a few months before the election—

NORTH: I arrived shortly before the US elections. After those elections Dick was asked by the new Administration to cover until a new appointee was confirmed.

They found a guy named Bob Blackwell. He had been part of a group that was called 'The Volcans.' They were conservative foreign policy advisors to George Bush.

Bob was a very interesting guy. Brilliant. Driven. A terrific policy driver. He had a geo-politic vision about the relationship with India and how to supercharge it. He saw a way to finesse the test issue and encourage the Indians to be more open to seeing some of the shared interests that they had with the U.S. in terms of our geo-strategic interests in a new light.

He came with an agenda at the beginning of the Bush Administration.

Q: Who was in power in India at that point? Was that the Congress party or had it changed?

NORTH: No, it was BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party). It was BJP. That party invokes another set of complicated issues. Some of those are still playing out currently because BJP is back in power. They were out for a while. They're back.

Prime Minister Modi, was already a political figure in 2001. He was the Chief Minister in the state of Gujarat. A few years later he was implicated in a pretty horrific incident involving a train and a group of Muslims basically being incinerated. His government did nothing. So, yes it was a BJP government.

A nationalist, sectarian dominated government but one that was also pragmatic in terms of their foreign policy and interested in exploring the kind of opening that Blackwell suggested was possible. The Bush Administration was willing to expend some capital in terms of high-level visitors and other kinds of soft diplomacy, if you will, to try to grease that process.

The galvanizing incident that really facilitated rapprochement was probably 9/11. Blackwell had been there a while and was making progress but 9/11 accelerated the building up of the relationship. I inadvertently ended up being a big part of that.

Q: Okay, so when you got there the relationship was a little bit shaky because of the nuclear test.

NORTH: I wouldn't say it was shaky. I would say it was distant. There were these hard lines that had been sort of stuck in that place since the 1960s. There'd been a big push in the sixties. A huge investment of development resources. The Green Revolution, setting up the Institutes of Indian Technology, massive investments across a variety of fields. That ended with positive development outcomes that stalled when political issues soured relations.

Q: Because things soured in the seventies?

NORTH: Yes. Many factors. The Cold War was one of them and India maintained a close relationship with Russia and promoted neutrality. Bangladesh was another. Vietnam. Indira Gandhi's somewhat imperious personality. Our tendency to see things in black and white. There was a long list of irritants. The embassy itself was sort of frozen as it had been in the sixties, if you will, and running on aged fumes. Dick Celeste had hoped that that was going to be able to change but that didn't pan out. But the potential of a better, more strategic relationship was revived at the beginning of the new Bush Administration.

Q: Since you brought up the long history of USAID in India and the many accomplishments, did you sense that while you were there? Was there pride in the work that was done there? Did you sense that when you were there? I assume you probably went to the IIT (Indian Institutes of Technology) in Kanpur?

NORTH: That's one of them. There are many.

Q: That's one of them, but I know that the U.S. was heavily involved with the Kanpur campus, as well as with many of the ag universities. When you'd go visit them, was there a sense of recognition that the U.S. had played an important part? I'm curious what it's

like when you'd go to a country many years after the earlier strong partnerships and accomplishments.

NORTH: Yes, there was some of that. Certainly the older generation did, particularly those who had benefited from long-term training and came back to become what were the faculties of those institutions. They had a lot of memory there and a lot of respect and appreciation. But there was also a sense that that was then and this is a new era. We're going to do it our way and we can succeed.

The economic opening was so energizing. Plus —there was this diasporic element to the relationship which got bigger and bigger over time. More and more South Asians came to the United States and became successful and wanted to have influence over U.S. policy and wanted to have good relations. Many wanted to also give back to India.
This sometimes came with baggage of its own. India's a hugely diverse country and there are all kinds of issues, you know, whether it's the Sikh desire for some kind of respect and respect for their religious rights, whether it's the Kashmiri question and concerns, whether it's caste with the perception being that most people who are able to migrate to the United States were high caste and not necessarily reflective of Indian society writ large. A lot of stuff to unpack.

Q: Yeah.

NORTH: Our program, by the beginning of the twenty-first century, was trying to figure out how it could still be relevant in that kind of a context. Huge poverty levels and a strong high tech sector. So many highly successful, highly capable, highly connected nodes of highly educated people making a lot of money. But we were all in the middle of a place that didn't work well because the social services were virtually non-existent, huge air and water quality problems from unconstrained pollution, huge poverty still, tremendous differences between urban areas and rural areas. Management of urban areas is pretty bad. An opening economy but still a lot of intervention by the state and the Indian Administrative Service, an elite-dominated Civil Service grappling with a political system which was highly segmented by caste politics and not very clean. And we're talking about a billion people, right?

Q: Yes, right.

So, when you got there, how had AID defined itself to be relevant? How much did it change during the four years you were there?

NORTH: We were asked to do a strategy and it ultimately was called "the last mile," which was a reference to a vision of how to get across the finish line. A notion that was probably too clever and simple and trite. India is not a slogan. But that's what we did.

We had this relationship with the government in which, until I got there, basically you couldn't move without their permission. In particular, you couldn't obligate funds without their counter-signature. As the winds started shifting in the relationship we got

more flexibility. And we had a counterpart in the government who was willing to be a little more trusting and open-minded. So, they allowed us to do something, sort of a made-up term, that we called a unilateral obligation. A very Indian kind of thing. Then we could do things directly.

It wasn't like we were trying to do anything that they wouldn't be comfortable with but it meant hydraulically that we could do things quicker and more nimbly. And with a broader set of actors inside and outside of government.

Q: What kinds of things did you do that with?

NORTH: I owe a great debt to Linda, Owen and Walter and the people that came before us who grappled with the same kind of problem - how to be relevant and impactful. To do things that would make a difference.

Our flagship program was a massive, long term reproductive rights program in Uttar Pradesh, the largest state in India. It was performance-based and we would release tranches of funding against fertility reduction performance standards being met to reduce fertility in that state. We expanded that a bit to some other states but we stayed the course in Uttar Pradesh. We were able to demonstrate that we were having a significant demographic impact, a positive impact. So, that program, in the midst of all the other changes, had persisted. Although it had huge support, the UP was a tough place to work. Lots of governance issues. Challenges in terms of transparency and competency. We sometimes found some issues along those lines in the program and had to do work-arounds and try to figure out ways to address them. But it did go on. Linda with her health background had really improved that program, revitalized it. We had a great health officer , Victor Barbiero followed by another outstanding health officer, Robert Clay. That was an area where we had a premiere program.

We were able to augment that when PEPFAR started and we got into HIV/AIDS work in Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra with some national level work as well.

A cornerstone of the program was being able to partner with a lot of foundations and NGOs. So, in the AIDS area, for example, we partnered with gays and others. There was a lot of opportunity for innovation and new approaches. We did great programs in some of the urban areas, like Mumbai. In Tamil Nadu we had a fantastic program. So, the health arena wasn't new-new but it was sort of taking practices that had been demonstrated to be efficacious and scaling them up in significantly important places. In the case of HIV, in terms of transmission and in the case of reproductive rights and population these were huge populations—I mean, Uttar Pradesh is—

Q: Bigger than most countries (laughs).

NORTH: It's bigger. About one-quarter of the size of Africa, sub-Saharan Africa in terms of human population. It's important globally. Of course, that was the issue always, the difference in terms of going from a Zambia to an India. This transition from a sort of

small place that wasn't really on the radar screen of the international community to one that because of its size, because of the nuclear test, because of the tensions in South Asia with Pakistan and what else was happening was getting a lot of air time. It wasn't yet first rank in terms of the preoccupation of any administration but it was nonetheless an important country. Had to be—it had to be in people's calculus. There are a lot more people looking at what we did, looking over our shoulder. And the Embassy footprint was huge with around 1,500 employees and three consulates plus the Chancery.

In another arena, food aid, we still had a program. Rodney Bent at OMB (Office of Management and Business) and several other people were consistently critical saying, "What are we doing giving American food to poor children when India has a surplus? If they really cared about their poor children they'd feed them themselves." So, that was a discussion we had. We did the program with partners in the NGO world, CARE and CRS (Catholic Relief Services) in particular. It was a good program, it was a great program. But you know, the fundamental point they were making had some—

Q: Had some merit (laughs).

NORTH: Had some merit but in other ways it didn't. Food aid was something that was also in our interest in terms of our domestic constituencies. And it was clearly in these poor kids' interest because the government wasn't then going to come in. Subsequently they have introduced some programs, and they have improved their social safety nets for communities. But at that point they weren't doing as much as they could have. All of these programs were done in partnership, particularly with state governments, and some in the south had more forward-leaning governments in terms of social services for poor people in schools and elsewhere.

Those were sort of the traditional elements of the program that had been sustained. The new stuff was high-end economic analysis and assistance. Working with the central bank and the stock exchange. Or with the Ministry of Finance on state level fiscal management and energy sector deregulation and unbundling. And clean technology use and development. We provided access to intellectual and economic capital in the U.S. and promoted exchanges. There was a lot of that going on. Science and technology, again, these linkages and programs back and forth. That had been Owen's signature piece. It continued and was very attractive. Through it we tried to re-establish some of the linkages with the IITs and institutions in the U.S.

One area that we didn't get involved in was democracy and governance. We had some niche kinds of programs like emergency management assistance. There was an earthquake while I was there in Gujarat. We got heavily involved in the response but we used that as a foundation for working with the government and the states to develop better emergency management systems.

Q: You mentioned unilateral obligations. You mentioned it being a bureaucratic expediting process that you did that for, that the programs were ones that the Indians in fact did want. Can you say more about that?

NORTH: I would say it was more to expedite things. An example might be the way we worked directly with the states.

Q: Okay, so if the state wanted to do it, you could go directly to the state?

NORTH: Yes. But we always consulted with the Center.

Q: Right. Was there any kind of formal annual review with any part of the Indian government?

NORTH: Yes. There was still an Indian Consultative Group. I think I went to one of the last meetings.

Q: Okay. So, they were still doing that.

Did you have a counterpart within the government? someone in the ministry of finance?

NORTH: It was in the ministry of finance in the Department of Economic Analysis or Department of Economic Assistance, DEA. And that was—there was a secretary there. He might have been a joint secretary and was our key counterpart.

Q: Another question about the mission and the role of FSN, Foreign Service Nationals. How did they fit into this new approach that you all were following in relationships with Indian authorities?

NORTH: It was amazing. The quality of our local staff was so impressive. We had so many stars like Madhumita Gupta, Ram Berry, Ashi Katouria, Hema Ramaswamy and so many others.

We had several gender programs focused on things like domestic violence and gender-based violence. Ashi was a champion for that. The program office had some really talented people. Across the mission in fact. Many of them, like in our environmental office, where we worked with cities on a lot of environmental issues, really drove change. One I mentioned introduced electric trishaws, small taxi like vehicles. Promoting and improving them was a passion of his.

We had about 130 staff, not all of them were substantively engaged but a significant number of them were. They were highly educated. We had an energy expert who had worked at the World Bank who came and worked with us on energy sector reform and was leading that charge. There was talent throughout the mission. They really owned the programs and had the capacity not just to own them and understand the issues but to sell them and to get buy-in from our counterparts.

Q: Given the strength of the Indian staff, did it always work well with the American staff that was coming in? I suspect in many cases the FSNs were more qualified or equally qualified to the American staff. Ever any issues?

NORTH: Yes. It could be an issue. That can be an underlying conundrum in any mission. Under our model the AmCits represent the U.S. government and U.S. interests but we can't do the work without local participation. But how much agency should you and can you give to local staff? They often know a lot more than the Americans about their country but might be biased. They often have more experience. They can be much better managers of people and of our byzantine processes. Yet they face career ceilings and legal limitations. How can you attract and keep the best if you don't provide space for independent action and leadership? We tried to find a way to encourage and respect the outstanding work.

AID as an agency, I guess, faces similar tension in its relationship with broader U.S. foreign policy interests. To what extent do we do the right thing in terms of development without considering potential echoes or implications in terms of our foreign policy priorities. We would prefer to just stay in the 'pure' development lane but …

I have often wondered how dispiriting it must be to be a highly talented FSN and to work with an idiot USAID employee.

Q: Yes. (Laughs) I suspect in some countries you could probably have just a couple of Americans and then have the rest be local staff.

NORTH: Absolutely. But there is also this dimension, especially during the Bush era, about getting the face of America out there. Face to face engagement. Soft diplomacy. It's about Americans and it's about Americans building those roads, American contractors and so on.

Q: Right. That's true.

You mentioned that the relationship after 9/11 prompted more and more attention to India. Is there more to say about that? I assume it also had some dynamic with Pakistan. When the U.S. went into Afghanistan did you feel that in India? Were you all affected in any way by that?

NORTH: Absolutely. We had to evacuate the mission during my tenure because of the possibility that nuclear war would break out between India and Pakistan in the wake of the terrorist attack in India, believed by the Indians to have been encouraged if not actively supported by the Pakistani government.

Q: I was unaware of that. When did that happen?

NORTH: Sometime after 9/11. I'm hazy now as to when.

Q: How long was the evacuation?

NORTH: You know, the evacuation—evacuations, once it happens is always longer than you think it's going to be. So, this was, I'd say maybe ninety days. But again, I'm not absolutely sure of that.

Q: Did you also have to evacuate?

NORTH: Oh, no. I was the DCM at the time so I stayed.

Q: How much of the AID staff did leave? Everyone or somewhat voluntary?

NORTH: Basically everybody. It was an ordered evacuation.

Q: So, did anyone in the AID mission stay?

NORTH: Just a few people.

Q: Okay. So, you were the acting DCM for a fairly extended period of time?

NORTH: Yes.

Q: How did that work out? Was it an issue with others in the embassy to have the AID director playing that role or had you been there long enough that you'd established relationships and people knew of your capabilities and therefore it wasn't an issue within the embassy itself?

NORTH: I don't know if it was an issue within the embassy. I don't think so. As I said, it was a huge embassy. We had about fifteen-hundred employees. We had three consulates. So, just from a management perspective, keeping the machine running was challenging, especially during the evacuation.

We were getting—we were stepping up the tempo of our engagement. Bob Blackwell had good reach back into the White House, the National Security Council and the department. So, he was able to energize the system, if you will. We had a lot more visits, high-level visits. I remember after Iraq happened, you know, we had—so it was—yeah, it was crazy.

Q: Did the president come?

NORTH: No, the president didn't but Colin Powell came a few times.
Dick Armitage a few times. Different cabinet-level-type people and other officials.

Blackwell had identified six areas for potential strategic cooperation and one of them was in the nuclear—civilian nuclear use crosswalk and trying to get Indian buy in to military-to-military cooperation. Trying to work around the nuclear issue and find a way

to make it possible for us to get past that irritant was challenging but I think he did. Certainly, that's been built upon subsequently.

Q: When high-level visitors came, was there any attention to what USAID was doing or was it mostly on the larger foreign policy issues?

NORTH: It depended on the visit purpose. Often we were a reminder of a less strong India and the past. And the new focus was on an exciting new future with defense cooperation, high-tech, economic liberalization, markets for American products, and selling things like airplanes.

But if the visitor was interested in social issues, disaster or HIV/AIDS our work was highlighted and we often provided photo op material that was useful for outreach.

Q: Right. Was there any space collaboration? Was NASA (National Aeronautics and Space Administration) engaged?

NORTH: Yes, there was. Not as robust as it is now. It had been even more robust earlier but went into abeyance because of the nuclear sanctions.

And then you started to dig out from under—we had a science counselor who was a really good guy. And he was a physicist by training and he established a good network of relationships.

Q: And I assume that the mechanisms you put in place that would facilitate linkages back to the United States in science and technology was something that was valued by the science attaché as well and that there was good collaboration?

NORTH: Yes, there was. And that's where the CDC (Centers for Disease Control) advisors were located. We were a PEPFAR country so that was also an issue and so, we had a great CDC advisor who was incredibly collaborative, effective and knowledgeable. She had actually grown up in India and was a great person.

Q: So, there were a lot of agencies there. Would you say that interagency collaboration was good?

NORTH: Yes, I think we were fortunate. I went through three ambassadors Dick Celeste, Blackwell and David Mumford. They were all committed to a strong country team approach and worked to support that.

Blackwell was considered to be a somewhat difficult and demanding person to work with and for. He did not serve a full term and left early because the White House wanted him back in Washington to help with Iraq. He had created management issues inside the embassy, and I was his acting DCM for a long time. But I didn't have a problem with him. I really admired his vision. I had bought into it.

I can see why other people had issues. He was very exacting, had high standards and was really incredibly hard working.

Q: No, I now vaguely recall some talk about that when he left. So, you developed a strategy, the "the last mile," but that last mile is still going on twenty years later.

NORTH: Yes. It's probably morphed—I haven't looked at their portfolio recently. I think some of the things still warrant engagement like the reproductive health stuff, HIV-AIDS, infectious diseases. We did polio work, for example, that was really critically important, useful with WHO. I hope those kinds of things are still going on and they reach back connectivity to American institutions, whether they're in science and technology or economic policy or whatever I think can still be fruitful.

Q: I think there's been a lot of focus on partnerships, helping to forge longer term partnerships between the U.S. and Indian institutions as well.

So, you agree that it still makes sense to be doing the kind of work that you all were doing, that it had value then and that it probably continues to have value?

NORTH: Personally, yes. India is a consequential place. It's important to continue to engage for the U.S. as much as we can, in as many arenas as we can. And in terms of global social indicators India still has a distance—a long distance to go. They've made great progress. I think there are obviously some worrisome political signals that we have to be alive to and manage. But the underlying importance of helping them to succeed in terms of global stability and outcomes is inescapable.

We can do a lot in a context like India with minimal resources because we can leverage those partnerships you were talking about.

Q: And were we doing a lot with the private sector there as well? And again, there is a burgeoning private sector coming out of a more statist approach for many years.

NORTH: There was always a private sector there and it was highly protected. It wasn't as competitive, it wasn't as energetic as it might have been.. But it was getting more so and it had more arenas to work in. We did a lot on economic advocacy with the Indian Chambers of Commerce.

Indeed, it's often been observed that the Indian world class IT sector emerged in part because of benign neglect from the State and in part from diaspora reflows from the States. Some claim the Government only realized that it was there when it was already successful and then it was too late to stop them. That was a line of argument. And so, Infosys is a good example of that. And no surprise that it started in places like Bangalore in the south. A good example of how the so-called brain drain turned out to be a two-way pipe: Indians coming to the United States, getting educated and going back with some understanding of our systems and using the knowledge that they got in the States to develop world class businesses. The Indians benefitted and so did we.

Q: Let me ask a different kind of question. The Afghan war started during that period and USAID was trying to set up a mission in Afghanistan. Were you all asked to provide and support?

NORTH: Peripherally. Things like procurement. We would sometimes have people flying in who were working the issue as the Indians were heavily interested in what was going on in Afghanistan.

We would have people coming in to brief them. Such a loaded relationship in terms of the issues around Afghanistan, Pakistan, Kashmir, India and the different intentions of the different players at different points in time. Expanding out a little further you have Iran on the western side of Afghanistan and the Indians had had a strong relationship with Iran.

After 9/11, while we were building up the coalition for Iraq, and then Afghanistan, we had a lot of visitors coming in. And we did provide some backroom support for the standing up of the mission on things like contracting services, procurement. But more importantly, we needed to keep the Indians informed and even hoped at one point they might join the coalition.

Q: Were they supportive at any point in time or did they just not criticize?

NORTH: I would say that they were quietly facilitative.

Q: One of the buzzwords now in USAID is localization and trying to do more directly with local organizations. Now, some of us felt that that was always (laughs) our mandate and in many missions a lot was done directly with local organizations historically. I assume that in India you probably did do a fair amount working directly with local organizations. I'm wondering if you have any thoughts about the degree to which AID should be doing direct grants or contracts with local organizations as opposed to going through U.S. entities.

NORTH: I guess it depends on what you want to do, what are you trying to achieve. If the development objective is, for example, that you want to achieve a reduction in reproductive rates, what's the best way to do it? I mean, I think it should be outcome-driven, myself.

And I think in some areas local is clearly best. And in a broad sense, of course, local capacity is what it's all about, right?

But you need to figure out the best way to get to the desired impacts and at what speed. Always tradeoffs. And sometimes going slower can work better if local ownership is a part of the approach. Local capacity building is difficult to achieve sustainably and maybe not be scalable. Strengthening government systems is tough work.

Q: Right

NORTH: If you have proliferation of local organizations at small scale the administrative costs of supporting their capacity building, their development and managing oversight forces tradeoffs that maybe are not so intuitively apparent. You have to be careful. And you need enough AID staff and money.

So, a great slogan. But what do you really want to achieve? Reductions in poverty? More choice for women? Educational access or quality? The state has a really significant role to play in some of the most important areas that have the highest payoffs. We also recognize that states have their issues. Whether it's transparency, accountability, capacity, incentive systems, whatever.

Q: Right. But for some functions, you can't achieve impact without the state—and you therefore should support that.

NORTH: Right. But in some lanes, if you buy into the notion that we should be supporting a community voice in decision making—voice and choice, the DG kinds of stuff, I think, you need to pause and assess. Government accountability is a part of the package.

Q: Okay. You briefly mentioned earlier about democracy governance programming and obviously, India is the largest democracy in the world with a functioning democratic system, maybe even better than ours these days. (Laughs) But were we doing any work to support DG work in India?

NORTH: No, not really. There was some marginal DG work such as environmental regulation. Also, to the extent that you increase fiscal transparency, you're sort of getting at some governance issues —Indirectly. It was certainly a prism that you would use in terms of assessing proposed interventions but never explicitly because that was an area where we felt like there were sensitivities.

Q: What about on gender issues?

NORTH: We did a lot of work in that arena.

Q: And that would have been an advocacy work of some sort? Were you doing somewhat indirectly, very issue-based?

NORTH: Yes. Directly and indirectly. We had some great ICS (Indian Civil Service) partners. The administrative services were staffed by a lot of elitist people, to be quite frank, who were highly educated, and incredibly intelligent. Some of them were women. Some of them were passionate about things like domestic violence and they encouraged our involvement.

Q: Right. I know you said you had lots of high-level visitors and the importance of India to U.S. foreign policy was clearly always there with a lot of interaction with Washington. Was there similar contact with AID Washington? That would have been the change of administration. Did Andrew Natsios ever come to India? Did you have—

NORTH: No, he didn't. We had a great desk officer, a woman named Nancy Eslick, who's still in AID. She was—and then Ebony Bostick, who was also good. But Andrew never came. And Jim Kunder was the AA (Assistant Administrator) and he—you know, by the time I think he got in and got appointed, he was sucked into Iraq and Afghanistan.

Q: Right, right.

NORTH: And that was where everybody's attention was.

Q: So, you were left alone, which is (laughs) a blessing in some sense. (Laughs)

NORTH: Yes. I think we were more or less, except for the Title II program that I mentioned earlier, where Rodney at OMB was unrelenting.

Q: But you were able to convince him.

NORTH: We postponed the day of reckoning but we ultimately were not successful.

Q: Okay. Okay. So, today there—

NORTH: I don't think there's a Title II program.

Q: You doubt if there are any Title II programs there. Right. And in your youth, hadn't you been in India with CARE on Title II? Well, that probably helped you to defend them, since you understood them so well.

NORTH: I was. I was a monitor in those programs.

Well, it probably wasn't useful because I was really passionate about them and you know, I'd seen how they worked, I knew what a difference they made for these kids, and I knew that the government wasn't going to step in and be able to perpetuate it. Although, I mean, they could have, that's true, but would they?

Q: Yeah. So, you all were working with state governments as well as the national level government, and the state level governments would have probably varied considerably?

NORTH: Yes. A good way to put it. Our biggest partners were probably Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu. And we did also have some partnerships during my tenure with places like Delhi and with some of the smaller states on the fiscal reform thing.

Q: On the fiscal reform. Okay.

NORTH: But sort of narrow gauge in terms of the focus, not as robust as Maharashtra or Uttar Pradesh or Tamil Nadu.

Q: Okay. We started this discussion about India with your wife's great interest in going there, so I'm assuming that she enjoyed your four years there and that you all fully engaged in the cultural life?

NORTH: It took her a while to get there because she was finishing her medical research in Zambia with Hopkins. Eventually she transitioned full-time to India after the evacuation. She really, really liked it.

Q: Was she able to work in India as well?

NORTH: She didn't try to work. She just got totally into different aspects of Indian life and culture.

Q: Did you lose her to some ashrams? (Laughs)

NORTH: No but there have been people who have done that. (Peasley laughs) Actually, in Nepal there's a lot of people who get really into meditation there. But no, she didn't go down that route. Textiles are one of her passions and archaeology writ large. There's so much to explore.

Q: Right. And you were able to travel around India freely?

NORTH: Absolutely. You can never see it all.

Q: Well, I'm very envious of the time that you had there.

So, you were there for four years and then what happened? What did you do? Were they hounding you to come back to Washington or did they give you options?

AID/W, Asia - Near East Bureau, Senior Deputy Assistant Administrator and other Senior DAA positions in Policy Bureau and Africa Bureau, 2005 - 2007

NORTH: Gordon West asked me to come back and basically replace him as a senior DAA (Deputy Assistant Administrator) in the bureau. And that seemed like a good transitional thing to do, to sort of get back to the States and see what was going on.

Q: So, in 2005, you come back to Washington, to the Asia - Near East Bureau?

NORTH: Yes, but I was mostly focused on the Asia stuff.

Q: Okay. So, as the DAA, you would have gotten caught up in the Afghan and Iraq work?

NORTH: I did.

Q: Would you like to tell us what was happening in your work?

NORTH: In retrospect, it was something like a case of mass hysteria. We were ensorcelled by the theory of the democracy agenda. I came back into the bureau in the second term of the Bush Administration.

There were a lot of 'deciders' who believed we could defy reality. I used to sometimes participate in meetings at the White House. It wasn't my primary responsibility, and I was usually a plus one. I sort of got sucked into it when Jim wasn't around or other people weren't around. I did spend a lot of time recruiting people to be mission directors in Afghanistan or Iraq or Pakistan. I spent a lot of time on that.

Q: On those three.

NORTH: —on personnel kinds of things and some on the substance and dealing with Andrew Natsios.

Q: And Andrew was obviously heavily involved in—

NORTH: Yes, sort of. That's a good question. I'm not quite sure how all in he really was. Then he left soon after my return.

Q: I retired in the summer of 2005 so I think you must have come in right after I left and Andrew was heavily involved with weekly meetings on Iraq, with the task force and the bureau and Gordon and others. And Fred Schieck was doing more oversight on Afghanistan at that time. The front office was pretty heavily engaged, I know.

NORTH: I was thinking more about what their involvement and influence was in the interagency.

Q: Oh, okay. There were others that overshadowed whatever AID wanted to say.

NORTH: That's right. I don't think there was a lot of openness to hear the development perspective.

Q: Right. I think that a lot of that has been documented, that AID didn't have as much voice as one would have hoped in those discussions.

NORTH: And yet, the costs in terms of the agency's structure, incentives, people's careers - aside from the cost for the poor countries that had to go through this, Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan. That was all hugely distorting in terms of the fundamental reason why you have a USAID.

Q: Right. Were you very much involved with Pakistan? Can you say anything about how it was—what were the priorities that we were trying to do there? Or, perhaps you weren't close enough to it.

NORTH: At one point I got recruited to go to Pakistan to be the director. Much of this is later. That didn't work out because I basically said, "I will do it, but I don't agree with the program that you're asking me to manage. But I will manage it. I'm a Foreign Service officer, if you want me to go there, I'll go and do my best." They were rolling out another program reset. It seemed like there was a new program and a new thrust every year.

Maybe that's an exaggeration—but you know, there was—they've lurched from one approach to another and it was driven by political appointees who had limited understanding of the many of the other dimensions of the problem set.

Q: Pakistan is such a perplexing country. AID has done some very meaningful things there, but AID has also spent a lot of time really struggling there. I'm just wondering if you had any insights on the issue?

NORTH: I only have insights from long distance or from a neighborly distance. And from Washington.

Q: Were there a lot of interagency meetings on Pakistan as well during that period? Or was it mostly Afghanistan?

NORTH: Of course.

Q: (Laughs) Okay. I can tell you don't want to talk about the interagency stuff.

NORTH: I don't think it's a happy chapter in our history, if you will.

Q: Right. Okay.

NORTH: I guess the neutral, polite way to put it is that it was a distraction and basically, we've lost twenty years. And there has been so much destruction and loss of life.

Q: Okay. So, how long were you in the senior DAA role in the Asia Bureau? You seem to have done several senior jobs back in Washington before going back overseas.

NORTH: I don't really remember. As you say, it was a while. Andrew was still in office when he asked me to be the senior DAA for PPC (Bureau for Policy and Program Coordination). Barbara had left.

Q: Ah, when she retired. Yes.

NORTH: Yes. I was very reluctant. I really didn't want to do it but, I said, "Okay." And then, shortly after I got there, Andrew left. Then Randy Tobias came in and the F Bureau experience started. Talk about distractions.

Q: Right. And that was the dismemberment of PPC then.

NORTH: Right. So, we were marginalized, sidelined and all that stuff. After a while, I ended up becoming the acting AA for Africa.

Q: Okay, let's go back. Can you say much about the establishment of F and the dismemberment of PPC since you were presiding over part of it during that period? Did you help to identify people to go to the F bureau to do the budget function?

NORTH: No, no. It was all precooked by people who were close to Randy and around him and had views. They figured out what they wanted to do and then did it.

Q: Okay. Because some people, you know, from AID went over—

NORTH: Yes. Many. Probably the most important one was Jim Painter, who was such an asset for the agency. It would have been crazy to try to do what they did without using his incredible memory and competence.

Q: Right. What happened to the policy people in PPC? Did they go to the F Bureau?

NORTH: They were not really part of the plan. The only one who I think did was Charles North. I suspect it was not a happy experience for him. I don't think he really was working on policy anymore.

Q: Right. But did the people in PPC get reassigned to different parts of the agency then?

NORTH: Ultimately. Some of them got put in the new F bureau, some of them got put in other bureaus in AID.

Q: Another big thing was going on around this time was creation of the Millennium Challenge Corporation, the MCC.

NORTH: Yes. Right.

Q: I know that Steve Brent was in PPC around that time and doing a lot of staff work. There were other AID people who had a PPC hat, but they were working on the establishment of the MCC. Were you involved at all with that, and do you have any observations about how that was done?

NORTH: Yes. Not intensively since Steve did such great work. But I was around and I remember that.

Q: Do you have thoughts about the issues that were being debated?

NORTH: I was thinking about it this morning when I remembered that we were going to have this call. I was recalling our discussion of the Development Fund for Africa?

Conceptually it's such an attractive idea, right, that a big push of resources is going to push people to some better place quicker and we'll declare success. That was sort of the kernel of the Development Fund for Africa. If we can just incentivize this right, make it so sweet that these people will just feel impelled to cross that finish line. So, the MCC as an idea has a lot of attraction. But I guess it's like social engineering. Sounds good in theory but it doesn't work in practice.

I haven't really followed MCC since the beginning. Has this theory ever been proved successful? Do we have evidence that where they made the investments people are closer to success than they would have been without the investment? I don't know.

Were the investments sustainable? Were the outcomes better than they would have been through other kinds of investment? Is it really differentiated from major infrastructural developments that someone like the multilaterals do? I just don't know.

Q: Right. Those are good questions that I'm not sure that anyone has looked at systematically. The one thing that they do talk about with the MCC is that the benchmarks that have to be achieved in order to qualify have had an impact on countries. Many make changes so that they can be eligible. So.

NORTH: I think that's probably correct at the margins.

It gets back to a structural, architectural question about the U.S. government and how it should—if it's going to choose to have a foreign aid program – do one right. Of course, we recognize that that's never going to happen. No one will be able to rationally repurpose, reconsider, restart the engine. I'm not the first person to observe that it's so fragmented that—

Q: Yes. I think there was an opportunity back in 2009 and it wasn't taken. Since we're on MCC, did you see MCC at work when you were in Indonesia or later in Papua New Guinea?

NORTH: I saw it. I was really close to it in Indonesia and when I was the ambassador in Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu and Solomon Islands. There was an MCC program that had been completed in Vanuatu that I got to see.

Q: Okay. Well, when we get to that maybe we can talk about any observations you have about those programs. We'll come back to that.

So, those Washington assignments don't sound all that exciting, although maybe when you went off to the Africa bureau as the acting AA, it was a more satisfactory experience

NORTH: As I think I might have said before, I always thought of myself as a child of the Africa bureau. I loved the chance to do the job. That was the upside. The downside was that it was a bridging posting. Nonetheless it was great.

Q: So, how long were you in that post?

NORTH: I'd already been assigned to Indonesia when I moved. I followed Kate Almquist, who was really strong. In some ways she might have been considered as an Andrew holdover or something. I don't know. But she had some strong ideas and some good management practices. She was really committed to Africa. Actually, Africa's been pretty lucky. They've had a lot of people who care.

Q: Right. So, you were the acting AA for a year, and this would have been 2006 or 2007?

NORTH: Around a year.

Q: Okay. And what were the main issues that you were dealing with at that time? Sudan must have been one of them and South Sudan.

NORTH: Yes. South Sudan was right up there. Sudan issues seem never to get better. I had worked on Darfur and the south in the 80s. I spent years going to meetings about Darfur and Southern Sudan. And coming back it was like whoa, nothing's really changed except South Sudan's being stood up and we're going to give that a shot.

We spent a lot of time on trade issues, military/AID cooperation, standing up the African Command, advancing PEPFAR, rebuilding Liberia, addressing emergencies, helping countries qualify for MCC money and the regular hum of personnel, budgets and program implementation. A big bureau. A lot of great people and a lot to do.

Of course, this was the high water point for global trade integration, although we did not know that at the time. The world was close to a major agreement on trades and services. Several African countries were likely to be negatively impacted – especially cotton producers in West Africa. We had a program to work with them on transitional assistance. USTR leaned on us to be participants in negotiations in Geneva at the WTO and a Hong Kong ministerial. I broadly support free trade with appropriate safeguards so I was happy to help them.

There were conflict areas, the template of the global war on terror had been grafted onto Africa, especially in East Africa and the Sahel. AFCOM was part of the response.

I mentioned the transition in Liberia. But there were also issues in Nigeria with communal tension. Zimbabwe was still not a happy place.

More beneficially, Southern Africa was working towards greater regional integration and had a robust trade agenda.

And most exciting of all, the PEPFAR program was starting to pay off with a lot of positive results.

I also saw there was much more ownership and leadership on the part of the Africans. That was so positive. In many places there was a lot of healthy demand from their civil societies for positive change. So, I thought it was a good time to be working on Africa.

And yet, we also knew that the demographic bulge was perking along and what the consequences of that were going to be.

Q: Right. So, you saw positives, but you also knew that there were some substantial hurdles to cross.

NORTH: Yes. And, we had great people in the—I think we've always had great people in the Africa bureau. Our field people were so committed and understanding. They developed great relationships with their partners. They were able to identify people they could work with productively. Even in contexts like the Congo, which was really, really hard.

Q: Can you give an example of where a country, a problematic country and people were able to make a difference?

NORTH: Well, I think the DRC (Democratic Republic of Congo) is one of them.

Q: Right. Let me go back. You had started talking about the Global Trade Agreement so I assume there were a lot of interagency meetings on that at the NSC. How easy or how feasible is it to get the development voice into those global discussions about trade arrangements?

NORTH: I think it's challenging. However, as the human capacity matured in Africa and there was more depth in terms of their talent base, they were better able to engage and did start to step up and become more assertive and effective. The four West African countries that were affected by cotton had a pretty strong game plan and they were successful at advancing their concerns. Organizations like COMESA, SADC, the African Development Bank and the Organization for African Union, they also got better at doing—at sort of playing the game. It did get better.

But whether that translates into a tilt that makes them have a real voice, given the scale of the rest of the world, I don't know.

Q: Right. And what about within the U.S. government corridors when those same debates were taking place? Was it possible to put the development perspective on the table?

NORTH: In that there was AGOA. the African Growth and Opportunity Act, there was—certainly there was some good movement forward. You know, part of USTR

(United States Trade Representative), worked closely with us. We had some resources to help to facilitate research on those areas to help countries to be better prepared to engage in the discussion. I think that was useful.

In the interagency, when you really got into the interagency and how it worked on trade issues it was dominated by Treasury. USTR in theory but in fact, Treasury, and Treasury probably wasn't that concerned about Africa.

Q: Okay. I ask in part because a big deal has been made of the USAID Administrator now having a permanent seat on the NSC. But, the degree to which the development perspective can be voiced and how important it is in those deliberations I think remains a question.

On Africa, you mentioned that in some ways it was depressing to see that some of the same issues in East Africa were things you had dealt with twenty years earlier.

NORTH: Right.

Q: Is it because they're intractable problems or it's because people don't know what to do? Are those same issues in Darfur and Southern Sudan likely to be there in twenty years? Or is there some way out?

NORTH: Well, I want to believe that some way out is having educated young people start to be given the space to demand and achieve significantly more opportunity and space to create societies that work better. I have to hope that. Unfortunately, I haven't seen much evidence that it's easy for people stuck in these really difficult situations to rise above the need to find the resources for the meal for tomorrow or the meal for today. That makes it really hard to not get stuck in a depressing discourse, one which is dominated by violent behavior by multiple parties.

Q: Right. Had the referendum in Southern Sudan taken place?

NORTH: I don't remember.

Q: I'm just wondering, were you involved at all or did you observe the thinking about what AID would need to do in creating a new nation state of South Sudan? Do you recall any discussions about needs and priorities?

NORTH: I don't recall the sequence but I certainly remember talking a lot about that issue with people like Susan Fine and in standing up a mission, finding people to staff it, the logistical complications of that setting in Juba, but I don't remember which track I was in when I was having those discussions, to be honest with you.

Q: Okay. I ask in part just because I would think it would be very tough to determine priorities in a new country with almost infinite needs. What time frame do you put yourself in?

NORTH: Yes. Really hard. Southern Sudan is such a challenging place. Huge. Land locked. Diverse ethnicities that had not gotten on well with each other. Pastoralists in some places, farming in others but no silver bullet asset that the world wants like gold. No infrastructure. Few educated people. Terrible social indicators. In some ways it reminds one of a place like DROC (Democratic Republic of the Congo) when they achieved independence.

Because whereas Sudan in the north, probably, you know, they'd had independence and some of the benefits of independence a relatively long time, at least a generation. And that never happened in the South. So, people hadn't had access to education, hadn't had access to social services to really speak of. They were totally isolated and terrorized. So, when a sort of peace came and it was only a sort of peace, it was never completely peaceful, and there was never completely an absence of active violent activity, so it was always tenuous. They—you know, how do you start to build basic structures that provide services, whether it's education, health, infrastructure. You know, these are huge physical areas with appalling infrastructure and—but you also have to be concerned, you know, to the extent you create infrastructure does it facilitate more violence.

Q: Right, almost unanswerable questions. So, you did that job for a year. You said in many ways it would have been your dream job. But you couldn't convince people or you didn't want to upend the Indonesia assignment?

NORTH: Right. Because that was another—again, that was sort of—my wife had (Peasley laughs) really wanted to go to Indonesia.

Q: Okay. That textile interest. (Laughs)

NORTH: That's a big part of it.

Q: So, anyway, you said that it was an interim assignment, so they probably had a political that they wanted to bring in anyway, so you didn't have the option. I suspect that was the reality.

So, you go off to Indonesia in 2000. Can you tell us about the program in Indonesia? Again, another long standing program that has had some great successes but also a very huge and very challenging country.

USAID/Indonesia, Mission Director, 2007 - 2010

NORTH: Yes. And of course, I'd worked there before during the Suharto era. So, it was a homecoming in many ways. In 1998 Indonesia finally tore off the shackles of that dictatorship and started the democratic voyage. It was one that was mostly successful in key areas. When I arrived it was sort of coasting along in a pretty good place. However, there was still a lot of overlap from the previous regime in terms of some of the people

who were still populating the scene, some of the people who had been dynastic echoes of earlier eras in Indonesia history. After the opening, Megawati Sukarno, Sukarno's daughter, had been elected president. By the time I arrived the president was S.B. Yudhoyono, SBY, as he was called, who had been a general before the change. He wasn't closely associated with unsavory aspects of what's called the Orde Baru. That was the name (New Order) for the Suharto regime. He had distanced himself from that. Unlike another General – Prabowo, the man who just got elected president in Indonesia. SBY never had the sort of the bad reputation that Prabowo had. Prabowo was even married into the Suharto family for a while. So SBY was not in the nexus of those familial dynastic relationships. That was a break from his predecessor Megawati.

He was a democratically elected general, more like an Eisenhower than a Suharto. Very committed to being a small d democrat. There were some institutions for accountability, like the Anti-Corruption Commission and the Elections Administration Organization and the judiciary, which had been retrofitted in the wake of 1r98. They were functioning more or less effectively.

There had been a huge decentralization program, setting up regional government administrations with a lot of autonomy. A lot of exciting things happening in the regions and a new generation of leadership. But it's hard to shake loose from all of the baggage of the past. You would see a lot of instances of corruption. The kleptocratic elite kept their influence in many ways and backsliding was an ever present possibility.

There were still tensions at the edges of the country in Aceh and Papua. (Timor Leste had become independent.). The horrific tsunami in 2004 had facilitated a peaceful resolution of armed insurrection in Aceh. We were heavily involved in helping that process and in the tsunami recovery program.

There were places like Sulawesi where there were sectarian problems and there was the active threat of terrorism. I arrived after the Bali bombings and an attack on a Jakarta hotel in which members of the American Chamber of Commerce had been seriously wounded.

Papua New Guinea at the eastern end of the country was always difficult. A very different kind of a setting. Melanesians, Christians, many small languages and high levels of inter-tribal fighting. Very isolated. Ongoing resistance to Jakarta. The site of the most valuable asset in the country is the mine at Tembagapura – Copper mountain.

How the government did or did not manage these questions in a manner that was consistent with best practices of human rights, democracy and transparency was an ongoing puzzle.

Q: There was a real movement towards more decentralization though, is that correct?

NORTH: Yes. But most effective in the core provinces like on Java, Bali and parts of Sumatra. I was excited to be back. It seemed like a good time to be in there and to be

active. We were active in a lot of different ways. We'd had some great, great mission directors, Bill Frej and Terry Myers and others who had built on the legacy of Bill Ford's strong programs in the eighties. And as in India there had been some consistent, sustained, long-term investments, particularly in health. They were outstanding and continued to flourish with decentralization. Those were good programs.

And one new area we were really involved in significantly was, of course, democracy and governance. We had a good resource base to use to support all those institutions. And we had some great, great democracy and governance staff. They were local staff and gifted expatriate staff like Kate Somvonsgir and Miles Toder,

Q: What institutions were you supporting?

NORTH: Among others, the Anti-Corruption Commission, the judiciary, the Parliament, the Elections Administration Office, the Ombudsman, local governments, especially in Aceh.

I had inherited the post-tsunami program in Aceh where we were constructing a flagship road that was going to wave the American flag and demonstrate that we could do infrastructure. It turned out to be a procurement nightmare, but it did ultimately get done. (Peasley laughs) So, that was good. Whether it's still there, I don't know.

Q: Were you able to wave the flag?

NORTH: Sure.

As I said earlier, the context in Aceh was highly promising with the termination of the insurrection against the central government. That set in motion a process towards regional elections, and we helped do that process which was not easy as some of the players still had grudges against Jakarta and each other.

We did some work in that area in Papua but very quietly and carefully. In Aceh we had a large footprint due to both the tsunami and the peace process. We sustained that commitment after I got there. We worked very closely with the new regional government. I spent a lot of time going to Aceh, in part because of the highway but in part because of the peace process there.

We were very active on environmental issues. We did a wide range of things, from the Coral Triangle marine protected area, to the establishing green sanctuaries on and near palm oil plantations to protect orangutans, to working to protect peat swamps from burning and working on regulations and enforcement. We had advisors working on broader forestry and land management issues.

Our economic growth program was no longer a traditional agricultural program. Indonesia had reached food self-sufficiency. We focused on higher value niche product production and helped with some market analysis and policy advice.

We developed a university linkages program with some long-term training in it. A modest initiative but one the Indonesians really wanted. Most of the senior economic people had benefited from participant training in the US. The payoffs were immense. Prudent macro policies since the 1970's had driven tremendous poverty reduction in Indonesia. We hoped to get more American scholars engaged in Indonesia.

Q: Right. You mentioned it just now and you mentioned it in India as well, and that's the continuity of programming and that sort of long-term commitment to working on an issue and as a result, having greater impact. That isn't always the case in USAID, and I'm wondering if you have thoughts about how AID can do a better job of ensuring that kind of continuity? Does AID need to do more to try to preserve continuity?

NORTH: Yes. But it's hard. It's hard because everybody who comes in has new ideas? And especially if they're political it's hard to contain. All too easy to fixate on what's broken and a lot of stuff is always broken, right? Part of that's self-inflicted. Who would have imagined that we could create a procurement system as complicated as ours. Sort of beyond human imagination.

Q: (Laughs) Right. Okay. It's just that the evidence is so clear where there is continuity, there is greater impact and yet, we still can't learn the lesson.

NORTH: Yes. And some problems are more amenable to the kinds of solutions that we have in our toolkit. Effective, sustainable democracy and governance programs are tough to execute.

But in the area of health we have a lot to be proud of. Indonesia was another example of that. Our child survival efforts around ORS and diarrhea management, routine immunizations, child weighing coupled with access to quality reproductive health services has paid off immensely.

And in education long term training was a winner. And where we had the resources, investments in primary education for girls was catalytic.

Similarly, the investments in research that became the green revolution are epic. Science and technology being applied to increase food production and more sustainable food production is an awesome achievement. But those innovations needed to be moved from the labs to the field and scaled up where the AID role was tremendous.

Q: Right, perhaps we applied our continuity principles to the areas where we shouldn't (laughs), where we're not going to have any impact, yeah.

NORTH: Well - the idea of nation-building in the last twenty years has been problematic.

Q: Yes. We haven't proved our ability to do that. In the early 2000s, I know that Asia Foundation was doing some interesting conflict resolution work and interfaith work in Indonesia. Was that still going on when you were there and, if so, do you have any thoughts on that work or other work being done by Asia Foundation?

NORTH: Right. In fact, there are some really strong, big, national organizations in Indonesia, like Muhammadiyah that we and TAF partnered with. Some of this of course was through the prism of the global war on terrorism. I don't think that was helpful. There are good development reasons to work with partners who are committed to girls' education and safe communities for women.

During Indonesia's history there has been a lot of heat and debate at various times and places around issues of religion. Certainly, since my first posting it seemed that more Indonesian women were wearing scarves in public and there had been terrorist attacks by Islamic extremists. There were allegations that much of this was driven by investments by outside actors in places like madrasas, mosques and pesantrens, which are educational institutions for young people. We did some important things with the Asia Foundation and its partners.

Q: You mentioned the global war on terrorism. Was that sort of a strategic overlay for the work that AID was doing in Indonesia? Was it used as a justification for programs, or did you simply get additional funding in its name?

NORTH: Certainly, it was in the lexicon that was used to trot out to get support for investments. I'm not sure that the breadcrumbs really led directly there but it was certainly used.

The Bali bombings happened in 2005 and I mentioned the bombing at the Marriott hotel in Jakarta. So, it was something that was definitely on people's minds.

Q: Right. Was the embassy in Indonesia as large as in India? As many agencies?

NORTH: No, it wasn't. Indonesia is about one-quarter of the size of India in terms of population. We have consulates in Surabaya and Medan. There was a consular agent in Bali. Large but not as big as India. There were a lot of agencies, not as many as in India. One critical difference was the scale of mil/mil cooperation. India was just starting to grow such a relationship. In Indonesia we had a very robust program.

Q: And who were your ambassadors when you were in Indonesia?

NORTH: The one who was there for most of my tour was Cameron Hume and then Scot Marciel came.

Q: Were they career ambassadors or political?

NORTH: Scot was career. So was Cameron.

Q: Okay. Both were career ambassadors. And an effective country team and interagency collaboration there?

NORTH: Yes. Very much so. Cameron was someone with big ideas about trying to develop a more strategic relationship with Indonesia. He had some good ideas. When Obama was elected there was suddenly a lot more space to explore some of those things. Obama had a huge resonance in Indonesia since he had lived there as a kid. We helped to host a visit by him and used the visit to get a lot of things done. Peace Corps resumed, a new American space at a shopping mall, a new MCC program, new defense cooperation, additive development resources and the like.

I can't remember what year it was but it was while SBY was still president and Cameron was still there. That was exciting.

Q: Can you tell us about what that was like, to have him come back to where he spent some of his youth? It was in Jakarta.

NORTH: First of all, his election was an amazing event in terms of the way the public responded in Indonesia. It was clear he won in a landslide in Indonesia. (Peasley laughs), The idea that someone who grew up in their neighborhood and became the President of the United States was a very big deal.

Another aspect is some Indonesian magical spirit. It's such a wonderful, wonderful place with lovely, warm people. And young people were especially all over his visit. And—

Q: They saw him almost as a native son. (Laughs)

NORTH: Totally. He is, of course, a brilliant politician. So, when he finally showed up, it was as if he were a rock star. And when he used a bit of local dialect in one of his speeches to a university audience that was a wow moment.

Moreover, the way he dropped it into his speech was very clever. He referred to talking about Menteng, a residential area where he lived. To most Jakartans it is an area for the super wealthy. But he made it clear that he was talking about the lower middle-class part of the neighborhood where he lived (Menteng Dalam – inner Menteng) and he pitch perfectly imitated the sound of a snack seller pushing a cart along the street. A son from Menteng Dalam comes home. Wow. (Peasley laughs)

We had a lot of high-level visitors. Hillary had come to Indonesia as her first overseas visit as secretary of state. She bought into the idea that there was an opportunity to transform the relationship and make it more strategic in the context of countering China. That was probably not something that the Indonesians would ever explicitly buy into but because of things like the South China Sea concerns, they were attentive. Under their

'free and independent' foreign policy rubric they're not aligned with anyone. But we are selling them more and more defense material.

Q: When Hillary Clinton came as secretary of state, you said you helped host her. What kinds of things would you take the secretary of state to see? Your thoughts on this could help future AID people plan these kinds of trips. What are your tips for VIP visits?

NORTH: I got to host her a second time in Cairo. It's interesting. When she came to Jakarta, it was, as I said, her first official trip. Her handlers were leftovers from her campaign. Their playbook for doing it was still from the campaign trail. Quite a contrast to several visits I worked on in India for Colin Powel. So, the PR component was paramount. Asking things like how is this going to look, how is this going to be photographed, how do we stage it, what's the messaging, who's going to do what, who's going to be where. So, very choreographed. All developed by pitching and reshaping a number of program options. We ended up doing a walk-through in an urban slum, looking at some kampung—a kampung is like a little neighborhood in Jakarta - improvement programs, particularly around water and sanitation with community engagement and community ownership. So, a kampung leader, a kepala desa, which means head of the area or head of the village, was basically her host. We walked through a—a one-way walk-through. The Secretary was dropped off at one end of the kampung, slowly walked through, stopped at a few sites and was picked up at the other end. Doing all of that, building it up and trying not to completely alienate the local community with all of your demands (Peasley laughs), much less the officials of the Indonesian government in terms of the overall program and different asks was a lot of fun. Good practice for the Obama visit.

Q: Did Obama see any USAID work during his visit?

NORTH: No, he didn't. He didn't have a lot of time. He did some public outreach kinds of things but spent most of his time in government meetings, then a meeting with civil society and a speech. And a state dinner. It was a formal state visit which made it pretty pre-packaged into a protocol vise.

Q: Right. Were you able to attend any of the events (crosstalk; unintelligible)?

NORTH: Yes. Judy and I were at the state dinner. I remember talking to SBY after the dinner. Indonesians are so hospitable and he had clearly been nervous about this visit. I thought the dinner had gone off well and after Obama had left I said something like that to SBY and he beamed. (Peasley laughs). He was clearly so relieved and happy. It was really interesting to see that.

Q: (Laughs) To see even the biggest wheels have that same anxiety during big events.

NORTH: Right. Entertaining. Just hosting someone and hoping it's going to go well. I think it would have anyway because Obama was just so intuitively graceful and gracious.

Q: Was some of this speaking in Bahasa? How well did you speak it? Did you take lessons while there?

NORTH: I was fluent in Bahasa from my earlier assignment.

Q: How much of a difference did that make in your ability to be an effective AID director, do you think?

NORTH: I don't know how much of a difference it made in terms of my ability to be an effective AID director but it certainly made it a lot more fun to be there. And I think it expanded the range and kinds of contacts you can have and what you can talk about.

Having said that, don't forget the Bahasa Indonesia is a national sort of made-up language based on Malayu. Indonesia is a highly diverse place. Bahasa Indonesia is not necessarily the first language for many Indonesians. They would learn it if they went to school. It is the language of instruction. Most people do speak some version of it or at least have some ability to speak some of it. But Javanese is—and Balinese and Acehnese and different— Batak and Sumatra and—there's a whole host of local languages.

Same thing in India, where English was usually a language of instruction at higher levels, but people at home would speak Tamil or—

Q: Did you learn any of the other languages or explore them at all?

NORTH: No. I learned a little bit of Javanese but not mostly just some common expressions.

Q: Right. I know at various points in time there have been OTI (Office of Transition Initiatives) programs in Indonesia. Was there an OTI program while you were there?

NORTH: Yes. Some of the Aceh and Papua work I talked about came from that bucket.

Q: They were the ones helping to facilitate the peace talks? What does that mean? Were they doing it directly?

NORTH: They weren't in the room when the talks were happening so far as I know. But they were helping people get together, carrying messages and planting ideas sometimes. Occasionally nudging but mostly in the background.

Q: Right. So, would they have been helping people on multiple sides of the issue to try to bring them to the table?

NORTH: Yes. It was a process.

Q: Okay. You mentioned a couple of your Indonesian staff by name earlier. I assume it's a mission with an exceptionally strong Indonesian staff and were there some still there from when you were assigned in the 1980's?

NORTH: There were a few. Not many. I think there was a new generation of staff who were, to be honest, better educated, in part because Indonesia had changed and they had more opportunities to get a university education or to study overseas. We benefited from that. We had some young staff who were really, really good.

Q: Okay. Let me just ask a word about donor coordination. Were there a lot of donors in Indonesia? Was donor coordination a key part of your job, and what role did the Indonesian government play in that coordination or was it simply the donors?

NORTH: Yes. When I was in DC I went to the last consultative group meeting for Indonesia. Bill Frej was the mission director. The World Bank program in Indonesia had a strong record of accomplishment and engagement. It was really appreciated by the government. The Bank had been the leaders of the donor coordination effort. But they and others were retrofitting their operations because Indonesia was now democratic, and it was having strong growth economically. There was a lot of poverty reduction. There was a lot more capacity in terms of ownership and management of the economic agenda. Really strong. The then and now Minister of Finance, Sri Mulyani, was outstanding. —She worked at the World Bank for a while and came back. There really wasn't any compelling need for a consultative group, except probably for coordination around the Aceh post-tsunami, post conflict process. There was a lot of donor coordination to get people into different lanes so there wasn't overlap and the important stuff got done. A very competent Indonesian, Pak Kuntoro, ably led that effort. Overall, though, in terms of economic management and the development path, there was a feeling that the donor coordination mechanisms that had existed were no longer relevant. And so, they stopped just before I got there.

However, formally there was a ministry that was responsible for donor management. We had a lot of bilateral discussions with them. Not much on coordination.

There was an informal group of donor reps I participated in that met regularly to compare notes. There had been similar groups in the other countries I worked in. Those discussions and relations were very useful. In Indonesia, the largest bilateral donor was Australia and we worked hard to try to connect with and leverage their assets.

Now you mentioned the Millennium Challenge Corporation. They came into the picture while I was there. One of the fun things I got to do was to help the Peace Corps re-establish their program in Indonesia. A less fun effort was an unsuccessful attempt to keep the Naval Medical Research Station open.

Q: Great. Why don't we stop for now.

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Q: Today is March 11, 2024, and this is interview number four with Walter North.

Walter, when we finished up last time you were in Indonesia and we talked a bit about the Indonesia program. But I think there are some additional things we wanted to cover. One of the things that you mentioned was reestablishment of the Peace Corps in Indonesia. Could talk a little bit about that as I'm sure that was a lot of fun.

NORTH: It was. It wasn't central to my role in AID but we happened to be able to provide some cover to get the process going. We played a minor role in facilitating the processing of the paperwork and providing space for them to do things. Having been a Peace Corps volunteer, always looking for ways to get more Americans interested in Indonesia and having been a friend of Bob Dakan, who had been one of the original volunteers in the short lived program of the 1960s, I really relished being able to help.

I always remembered Bob's tales of his many adventures in and around Semarang. That was where he met his wonderful wife. He had lovely Indonesian and a deep understanding of Java. And he was there during the years of living dangerously when Sukarno was ruling and telling the world, 'Take your aid and go to hell!' During the sixties in Asia it was a crazy, crazy period.

So, we helped them. They had a small program initially doing English teaching. The Indonesians loved that. So many young people wanted to be able to connect to the larger world and English helped them do that.

Q: And how long had Peace Corps been gone?

NORTH: It had been gone basically since Bob's group—

Q: So, it was really just a very short period that Peace Corps was in Indonesia then. Alex Shakow had helped set it up back in the 1960s.

NORTH: Yes. Alex had a lot of associations with that. His legacy at the World Bank and the Bank's reputation in Indonesia were amazingly impressive. And then at the Harvard Institute for Development. That Institute had a huge role in the economic success of Indonesia. I was thinking about that after our last meeting. When you contrast the economic trajectories of India and Indonesia you see two very different settings with somewhat divergent development paths. In India you never had a sustained period of instability and democracy was protected, except during the emergency which was relatively short in duration. There were horrible consequences of partition and later regional hostilities and internal problems like Kashmir. Economic management had been statist and growth was sluggish at best while population growth was accelerating. Huge poverty problems. That dynamic only started to change in the early 90s. Since then things have gotten a lot more like Indonesia's growth path.

In Indonesia, even though it too is huge and is spread over a wide archipelago it's approximately a quarter of the population of India. But if you look at their experiences since the colonial era, being a bit simplistic, they were nominally democratic but really dominated by Sukarno. He provided terrible economic policies and stirred up all kinds of problems with neighbors, donors, various local interests and the results were awful. 15 or so years lost.

Then in 1965 another authoritarian emerged with the start of the Suharto era. It began with massive killing of leftists and others and ongoing repression of dissent.

But Suharto mostly had sound macroeconomic policies and tolerated or welcomed international expertise. That enabled huge poverty reduction from the late 60s until '98.

If you benchmark their performance with India, both benefited from the green revolution, both broadly expanded access to health and education services and invested in infrastructure.

But in the reproductive health arena India tried forced sterilization because their initial programs didn't work well enough. The toxic legacy of the initiative set back family planning in India for years.

Indonesia had one of the best reproductive programs in the world. Dua cukup – two is enough. Voluntary, widespread, and effective.

The benefits from that, from wise macro management and stability led to pretty broad based, consistent growth. Not that there were not problems of kleptocracy, crony capitalism, over dependence on earnings from extractive industries and ill-advised protectionist policies. But they started really growing about 25 years before India.

Q: Right. And would you say a more equitable economic growth pattern?

NORTH: That's a complicated question. India's path has also seen kleptocracy and rent seeking, The political class has more or less protected a local industrial elite. They have also been overly protective of rural interests which is actually fully understandable but not sustainable without growth from somewhere.

Equally tangled are the significant unrealized social transformation in terms of land owning and caste politics that have led to things like the Naxalite movement and farmer suicides.

At the end of the day, depending on the indicator you pick, either a social one or something like income, say the $1.25 a day standard, Indonesia's performance was much better. As I said earlier, thankfully things picked up in India after the early nineties.

Q: Yeah. It is interesting that Peace Corps went back into Indonesia, given all this progress. Was that in great part because of the bloom of the Obama era?

NORTH: That might have been in the atmosphere. Maybe the Peace Corps was looking for more opportunities in Muslim majority countries. We had an ambassador, Cameron Hume, who was very interested in trying to reset the relationship into a more geo-strategic context. Things like Peace Corps and the MCC added arrows to the tool kit.

The Indonesians, with a lot of good reasons, were reluctant to be drawn into our framing of such a narrative. One of the problems for Indonesia, in terms of the U.S. and globally, was a desire to be a player but not to have to pick sides. It should be such a significant player and can be as it has demonstrated in South East Asia with ASEAN. It's a huge country, large population, successful economy, a BRIC, a club of successful middle-income countries–Brazil, Russia, Indonesia and China. A grab bag of a group which was attractive to them. Overall, however, its weight in terms of international presence, international recognition and knowledge of what it represented was not as good as it could have been., Most Americans have probably heard of Bali but they don't really know anything about Indonesia.

We didn't have a lot of Americans studying in Indonesia or working there. We have tried but it's always been difficult. The Peace Corps theory was in part if you can get them to come, they will be hooked and stay engaged. I had seen that effect in Ethiopia where, in the wake of the famine in 1985 and after Mengistu fell, the ex-Ethiopia Peace Corps community were very influential on our policies, including people like John Garamandi and his wife.

We wanted people to find out what a wonderful place it is, how interesting it is, what a rich history it has and what an amazing culture it has. That would be good for both countries, especially to the extent that volunteers came back and spread the good work in the US.

Q: That's an interesting idea—that the interest of the U.S. in a country is enhanced by the number of Americans who have visited and experienced that country. Certainly, Bali has had that effect on many Americans (laughs).

NORTH: Another thing that helps country reputation with the Americans is a diaspora. And Indonesia doesn't really have a diaspora in the US. There is one in the Netherlands because of the colonial experience. There are some Indonesians around Washington and on the west coast. I have met many in the DC area. They have never been as vocal or as engaged politically as the South Asian community became. And we're seeing a significant Ethiopian diaspora having similar kinds of influence in the U.S. But not Indonesia.

Q: Interesting. So, one of the other U.S. government agencies that also came to the fore during this period was the Millennium Challenge Corporation. It was relatively new because they were created in 2004. So, they were developing a compact for Indonesia while you were there?

NORTH: Yes. With an entrepreneurial ambassador, happy to build new strands in the relationship, MCC was a god send. Their focus became climate change by reducing emissions from forest fires. Indonesia has huge forest assets and resources, which are critically threatened from a number of angles. Most significantly, in terms of degradation linked to climate change, it was the loss of carbon sequestering peat from the fires that needed attention. Much of this was driven by palm oil plantation expansion in Sumatra and Sulawesi. There's a huge global demand for palm oil. Indonesia was conflicted about what to do. On one hand the economic opportunity that palm oil presented was huge. But on the other hand they recognized that they needed to do a better job of managing their forests *and* especially preventing these forest fires. The fires create huge regional negative impacts and Malaya and Singapore have been concerned. When the fires are burning they create huge regional complications for everything from air transport to public health. There was a global effort going on to reduce emissions from deforestation. The MCC program was focused on trying to be a player in that arena. We partnered with people like the Norwegians, who had put significant money on the table to encourage more protection, to protest more areas, to develop better regulation and oversight of the assets and to cushion adverse economic consequences. We all encouraged sustainable palm oil development that could be done without hammering orangutan habitat and over-cutting timber canopy. Responsible corporate partners like Mars helped out. But there was a lot of pushback.

Q: I'm assuming that Indonesia was eligible at the very beginning of the MCC, that it had met the eligibility threshold indicators from the beginning. Is that correct, or did they have one of those threshold programs to help meet the target indicators?

NORTH: No, they didn't have a threshold program. They were deemed to be eligible. There are still a lot of issues there in the corruption area and with the government's quality of governance but definitely Indonesia then was in a fundamentally pretty good place.

Q: Was MCC consulting with you all to help in the development of the program?

NORTH: Yes. Intensively. We basically had such a long history and so many relationships that we were able to facilitate things and open some doors for them. They did project development long distance so they weren't physically present for quite a while. We tried to be good messengers and honest sounding boards.

Q: Did you gain any impressions of the MCC model while you watched it being developed?

NORTH: Well, there's theory and practice, right? The theory was that MCC was somehow exempted from the politics of the world. You met the criteria and made the commitment to keep doing the right thing and you qualified – seemingly regardless of the complexities of your history. And all would be good. That turned out not to be the case, let's just put it that way. (Peasley laughs) The forestry ask was a massive one given the political economy of the sector and of Indonesia. To change and reverse practices that had

really devastated large parts of the forest legacy of Indonesia was hard. Huge business interests felt that it was a model that was working for them and they weren't going to go away quietly. And they haven't. It's still highly contested. There are some great NGOs working the issue and they kept the spotlight on all of the actors.

MCC was wading into that with eyes wide open. Sort of brave. They were not naïve. Nonetheless you have to be careful and not just listen to people talking a certain kind of talk and make sure they are going to be able to deliver. Are you really asking for something that they can deliver on, even if they want to deliver? Patience, being able to stay the course and progress at the pace of your partners - all those sort of standard development things was a learning process for the MCC team, which was highly motivated, highly efficient and effective. Smart, really good people but they were running into a system that wasn't yet set up to mesh easily with that kind of ambition.

Q: Do you think that USAID, if it didn't have earmarks and funding constraints, could have done the same kind of program?

NORTH: Yes. But we would have had to augment staff skill sets and maybe add staff. The big difference was the scale. More like a major bank project. More resources and more flexible ones than we were given access to. In the end the fundamental project design and implementation elements didn't turn out to be that different from what we do.

Q: Right, that would be my impression as well.

Do you know if there was a follow-on one in Indonesia?

NORTH: I don't know.

We had a great environmental team at USAID. We had some Americans and Indonesians who had been bouncing around Indonesia for several decades. They were clear eyed about what we faced. Alfred Nakatsuma and Dave Heesen were inspiring in their dedication and local knowledge. I think Alfred's still engaged. They had these incredible networks of people and both of them spoke absolutely lovely Indonesian. Their temperaments and intellectual skill sets were incredibly effective in that context. They too helped MCC, along with input from some very good people on the Indonesian staff. Many of our initiatives were excellent complements to the ambition of the MCC program.

Q: I remember speaking to someone else who had worked in Indonesia and they mentioned AID supporting some of the Indonesian environmental groups who were sometimes in conflict with the mining industry either over environmental or human rights concerns. These conflicts sometimes involved American firms. Did that occur while you were there?

NORTH: I personally never ran into anything that explicit. The biggest company and footprint with an American connection in Indonesia, which is a huge element of their

whole GDP (Gross Domestic Product) is the Freeport mining operation in Papua. That was always highly controversial because of the post-colonial situation in Papua, which was very different from the history of the rest of Indonesia.

Freeport was a huge operation in the middle of nowhere. And yet - it contributed something like 5 percent of GDP. The rip and ship heart of mining is not pretty. There had been adverse environmental impacts. I visited it in the 1980s and again as Director. I was amazed that it existed—a huge engineering achievement - but concerned at the social and environmental toll. Practices had improved since the 1980s but fundamental questions were still on the table. The money went to Jakarta and the States. Local people not so much. The rights of the traditional landowners and the traditional people were not really fully respected. Again, after 1998, with regionalization, things improved but not enough. I don't recall it coming into tension with our program.

There were other US extractive players like Exxon Mobil but at that time there was not a lot of anti-fossil fuel animosity in Indonesia. More has developed as they continue offshore development and massive coal mining. But we were not in those arenas.

We did a lot on illegal fishing and maritime protection. I think I mentioned that and some work we did in the palm oil sector. In my first job in Indonesia in the eighties I supported something that was called Walhi, which was an environmental NGO. It was very active on a lot of these kinds of things. They essentially started the environmental NGO movement in Indonesia. When I came back after the democratic transition it was heartening to see a lot of those people were in key positions in the government. One of them was a minister, another one was a presidential advisor. They were trying to, you know, do the right thing.

But they were up against a lot of business interests. I'm not so sure about their mining activism. There was a Canadian nickel mining company in Sulawesi. On most of the outer islands the risks were more from land clearing for things like palm oil and rubber. Many of those businesses were dominated by ethnically Chinese elites. Their presence in Indonesia since the colonial era, their economic successes and close relations to the Suharto government and ongoing profile was problematic.

Q: I was going to ask you whether the Chinese were active in Indonesia or not.

NORTH: There are Indonesians of Chinese descent. Most of those families came to Indonesia in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. They were part of the colonial construct, a compradorial class. Many started in the ports, worked on plantations and railroads and eventually started setting up retail operations. They ended up dominating key elements of the economy. Parts of the plantation sector but also things like tobacco manufacturing and beverages and the like. Their relations with indigenous Indonesian groups were often difficult.

Q: Right. Were the Chinese active as a bilateral donor in Indonesia during that time?

NORTH: They were a bit. But there's a history there. If you go back to the transition to the Suharto era in the 1960s, the Chinese role in that shift was contentious. The formal history promulgated by Suharto and perpetuated during his era was that he saved the country from a red Chinese supported coup that wanted to impose communism in Indonesia. That's a very simplified picture, but that's what got embedded in the history books. That's what got in the training that all the people who were Indonesian officials got. It became a part of their intellectual DNA: communist China was not a good thing and the Chinese did not have good intentions.

And during the transition from Sukarno to Suharto many Indonesian Chinese were killed and their economic assets looted.

The truth is more complicated. It is true that Sukarno did have strong links to the Chinese Government. The PKI (The Indonesian Communist Party) which was huge in the 60s was allied with him. Moreover, with Bandung and other initiatives, Sukarno positioned himself as a leader of the Non-Aligned Movement with good relations with China.

Suharto was adamantly anti-Chinese communists but he did pay a sort of lip service to the non-aligned movement. The formal heart of his foreign policy was the line about 'independent and free.' As time went by in the 80s and 90s things got better and there was more engagement, albeit limited. The Indonesians were always wary. They would never explicitly say, "We're suspicious," or "It's hard for us to be friends with the Chinese." But that was always in the background.

Likewise, the Chinese played a careful long game. When I went back I don't really remember them being that present on aid issues but they were doing a lot more business with Indonesia.

Now, from what I'm seeing in the Indonesian press and reading, it's much more engagement, especially private Chinese economic investment. It has skyrocketed. I haven't seen the numbers, but I would suspect that new direct foreign investment from China has significantly exceeded what the U.S. does or anybody else.

Q: Okay; interesting.

USAID has often tried to do regional programming in Southeast Asia, including some economic and environmental work. I'm curious if during the period you were there, were there efforts on that front? Was there much that you got involved with in supporting U.S. regional efforts?

NORTH: They stood up a regional mission in Thailand. I had worked on that when I was in Washington. In part this was to improve our ability to do things in countries without missions. The regional mission struggled to find good programming entry points. Some of the work on conflict, disaster relief (our OFDA backstop was there) and the environment (the Coral Triangle Initiative comes to mind.) was helpful to Indonesia, things like tn. But we had a large program of our own to deliver.

But mentioning OFDA reminds me of how critical and helpful they were. When we had disasters, they were on the case and amazingly effective. They also were doing preparedness work on early warning systems for tsunamis that was exciting. And we even partnered with USGS in a volcano monitoring program that was accurately monitoring eruption risks.

It may have been more sensible for land-based Southeast Asia. We did have missions in Vietnam and Cambodia. But places like Laos and Myanmar did not. And the regional mission was also asked to do programming in the South Pacific

ASEAN was headquartered in Jakarta. We didn't really have a strong ASEAN focused program where we might have had some impact on trade.

ASEAN as a regional stabilizer has been amazingly and surprisingly effective. Given the differences between the countries it's helped to avert inter-state conflict in the region. A huge plus.

Q: Okay. Anything else on Indonesia that we should cover now?

NORTH: I think that's more than enough.

Q: (Laughs) Okay. So, you were nearing the end of a tour and then thinking about moving on?

NORTH: I think I was planning on retiring.

Q: Oh, that's right, again, yes. (Laughs)

NORTH: I was supposed to be in Indonesia for another year and then I got a telephone call. I already knew I was being considered for an ambassadorial nomination. So, I guess I wasn't still planning on retiring.

Anyway, the caller asked, "Would you go to Egypt?" I said, "Well do you know that I'm likely to become an ambassador? I wouldn't be able to go there for that long."

This was one of these classic AID things. The guy I replaced, Jim Beaver, had just—had bad luck, really. He had done what he was supposed to do, had been asked to do and had been encouraged to do in the wake of the Arab Spring. He retrofitted the program. This had triggered a big push back from the Egyptian government. Basically, he was sacrificed. An offering on the altar of something. He had to leave. They were desperately looking for somebody. Anne Patterson was the ambassador. She and I had talked about Pakistan when she was there but that didn't work out. She was the genesis of the call. I said, "Okay, fine, sure. But you understand my situation, one which is not public and which I can't talk about.' I felt I was put in an awkward place.

This was terrible because I felt the one thing that the Egyptian program needed more than anything else was continuity. Egypt was still in the midst of the Arab Spring aftermath. It was a completely roiling cauldron of all kinds of things happening.

Q: Right. So, this was 2011 then, when you went to Egypt. Did you tell Anne that you would not be there for a long period?

NORTH: Oh, she knew. I mean, yes, of course. (Laughs) I don't know how many other people knew but not many. So, that was really awkward for a variety of reasons.

Q: Yeah. But you did go to Egypt.

NORTH: I did.

Q: And you were there for about a year or—?

NORTH: About a year.

Q: About a year. Okay. Well, that's enough to help stabilize things a bit.

NORTH: Well, there were a lot of triumphs of hope over experience operating in that arena.

USAID/Egypt, Mission Director, 2011 - 2012

Q: Was the Muslim Brotherhood leading the government then?

NORTH: Yes. In effect if not yet formally. They were now legal and active. They were hugely popular. This was a period leading up to elections which Morsi, the head of the Brotherhood, won. When I left he was still in power but in trouble. And—

Q: Okay, so an interesting case of an election electing someone who doesn't seem to survive very long. (Laughs)

NORTH: He didn't. As an outsider, sympathetic to the aspirations that were expressed by so many amazing people that we got to talk to and see in action, it was awful to realize how things were unfolding and how little we could influence anything. The deeply embedded structures of the so-called deep state and their endurance, especially in the military, were a big part of that. But there was a lot of local cultural baggage as well. And the long history. It is hard to achieve sustainable, equitable change in a deeply traditional society.

They had been through some horrible history since the end of the Second World War.

Q: So, the Arab Spring started in 2009 or 2010? Mubarak had already been pushed out?

NORTH: Yes; he was gone but he was in detention. And there was going to be a trial.

Q: Okay. And so, there was a temporary leadership?

NORTH: There was an interim government and all these ministers. But the real—there was a military presence in the background that was quietly operative. And el-Sisi the guy who emerged from all this is the current dictator cum president or whatever. He was the head of staff or the chief-of-staff. He was the chief guy. Our chief interlocutor, really.

Q: Okay. So, what was the U.S. doing? You mentioned Jim had been sacrificed. What were we able or not able to do in supporting an election and civil society? And can you give us some idea of what the program was doing at that point in time?

NORTH: Well, what had gotten him in trouble wasn't anything he just dreamed up out of nowhere. He implemented a program that backfired. It involved making independent grants without government approval to a universe of NGOs. Nothing like that would have been done by us without a lot of inter-agency discussion. The Egyptian government froze those grants publicly and with a lot of feeling. So, he had to leave.

I came in and was supposed to somehow clean things up. It never did get cleaned up. It just sort of festered. The grants were frozen. I felt like we couldn't formally close them, but we were never able to see them executed. It was a harbinger of the reality there. The dark forces had taken a bit of a breather but were regaining their second wind to come back and ultimately prevail.

Q: Right. Were these like the grants to NDI (National Democratic Institute) and IRI (International Republican Institute) or were they just for local groups?

NORTH: That's one of them. Then the guy who was the IRI head got detained. We ultimately had to get him out of the country. That was done in sort of a less than transparent way. He was the son of a cabinet member in the U.S. government, another complication.

There were a lot of things like that going on. Moreover, in Washington, there was this real tension between the people who wanted to believe that somehow Egypt could become a democratic state and successful, still be aligned with the U.S. in terms of foreign policy interests, grant us continued access to the Suez Canal, permit overflight rights, stay in the peace deal with the Israelis and be a partner in peace in the Middle East and a more skeptical group

So there were the people who really wanted to see it all work out. The skeptics or realists said, given the history of Egypt, that's probably not likely to happen. So, how do we protect our strategic interests? How do we sort talk the talk but do a walk which protects those strategic interests when things go south in this process.

Anne Patterson, is a peerless, highly professional and competent, hard-nosed diplomat. She tried very hard to carefully, intelligently and sensitively walk the line between all of those tugs. A lot of pressures. Dealing with the Egyptians and their various actors during the day and with the inter-agency constantly.

And having good intel on various players which had to be managed appropriately but which further complicated relations and our public framing of issues. Very challenging. Meanwhile, as this was playing out, the Egyptian economy was in the tank and progress on an IMF standby and bailouts from Gulf states was elusive, the public temper was boiling with many demonstrations, labor actions and political events.

Anne was a great leader for an embassy team. The Israeli embassy was attacked and ransacked while we were there. We had constant demonstrations. The embassy is located right next to Tahrir Square, which is where people would tend to demonstrate. Messy and unstable. The embassy at one point was attacked and they overran the walls. I fortunately wasn't there when that happened and our office was out in Maadi. So keeping people focused was a challenge. She was great at that. She shared information and was inclusive. What an awful job and she did it extraordinarily well.

Q: So, a major part of our program was still the traditional things we'd always been doing, the infrastructure, the health, etc—is that correct?

NORTH: It is. But we were still trying to retrofit things. And we had a lot of resources. More of a job creation focus. More training for young people in traditional communities. Elections support. More public outreach and PR. The public pitch was to signal that we wanted to make this transition successful, we're on your side and we're with you.

I was asked to do a lot of public diplomacy. We expanded fellowship and academic scholarship programs in underserved areas. We ramped up support in the economic growth area to help resuscitate the tourism sector.

Of course, as we were trying to do this we needed to do it through AID mechanisms. And our machinery tends to work slowly. We had a huge, huge operation for an AID office.

One of the legacies of the Mubarak era had been the construction of a huge office building. We had a huge staff. We had a way of working with the Government that was tightly controlled by them. They saw the aid as a quid pro quo for the Carter brokered peace deal with Israel. Consequently, it was a dance to coordinate. This gave the mission sort of a frozen in time feel. It had become sort of pharaonic. (Peasley laughs)

My office was like this massive, dark space far away from everyone. One of the things I did was to move out of there into a glass-walled office and to try to do things a little differently and lightly. I don't know if that was effective or not but it was an attempt to break down the way things had been done before and try some new things.

Q: Did we still have the policy-based cash transfers at that point in time or had they stopped?

NORTH: I don't think we had any policy-based cash transfers.

Q: But we did still have cash transfers?

NORTH: I don't think we did.

Q: Okay, because they stopped at some point doing that. I know there were pressures always on whether or not the policy work was effective.

NORTH: Yes.

As I said we always had this poisoned relationship with the Egyptian government Ministry that was our counterpart. The woman who ran it had been there forever until she was forced out after Mubaruk's fall. She was still a force in the background and had close relations with el-Sisi and the military. She was extremely nationalistic a la Nasser. That is fine to some extent but for her there was a heavy tinge of barely concealed anti-Americanism and perpetual suspicions of what we were up to. Even though she was gone, the staff she had trained and mentored still mirrored her views and attitudes. I don't know if she resurfaced in that job since she was so close to el-Sisi.

Q: We also had a longstanding FSN staff in Egypt. Any thoughts about them? Because during this political time I suspect there were multiple political perspectives within the Egyptian staff as well.

NORTH: Yes. The composition of local staff in our missions is often not consistent with the larger 'face' of the host nation. I think I might have mentioned it when we talked about Indonesia where we had a disproportionate number of Seventh Day Adventists because we didn't work on Saturdays. And in Ethiopia we probably had mostly an Amhara staff. Similarly, in Egypt we had a staff with a significant Coptic Christian presence, probably proportionally greater than in the general population. But I am not sure how or if that actually affected our work.

Nonetheless they were extraordinarily talented, urbane and open minded. Perhaps characteristic of urban Cairo's educated class. That class is of course very different from the Egyptian heartland. Cairo is this huge megacity but a lot of the country is rural and very economically distressed.

In our DG office we had some really great Egyptian advocates for democracy who had been in there for a long time looking for openings. When the Arab spring came they were ready to move. And they had and then they got stymied with the freezing of the unilateral NGO grants. They still had 'safer' programs like work with the judiciary and, because of their networks, were great sources of information.

As I said, we had been asked to ramp up public outreach efforts and we set up an office to take that on.

In the technical areas we had really, really good people. Competent professionals. Well-trained in their disciplines, whether it was public health—we had a good public health program—or it was the environment or economic growth. Whatever area it was there was a lot of depth there. Asin India, to some extent, the FSNs were much more technically qualified and had better contacts. They could speak the local language, understood what was doable and what wasn't. During this period they were living under a lot of stress. That was hard for them. And, as at other Missions, we had to always assume that the Government had sources inside our operations.

Q: Right. One of the things that had started in Egypt with the U.S. government during the Bush Administration MEPI, the Middle East Partnership Initiative that Liz Cheney had started up. But I believe that that programming continued on into the Obama Administration. How did it relate to what USAID was doing?

NORTH: I dealt a lot with MEPI when I was in Washington as Senior Deputy Assistant Administrator for Asia. By the time I got to Cairo that program had sort of slipped into the background. It might still have existed but it was one of those things that seemed to fade away.

We did have a coordinator for Arab Spring assistance who was a really good guy. He came in sometimes because we were also trying to get (laughs) just so many weird things going on here—we were trying to get the Egyptians into a program with the IMF (International Monetary Fund). Their macroeconomic situation was in a mess. And so, Bill would come in occasionally to try to talk to them, to encourage them to do the right thing. Anne had also brought in a special econ advisor, Milton Drucker, and an aid point of contact person who got into those discussions.

Q: That was Bill Taylor?

NORTH: Yes. A great guy. (Laughs). Another person stuck in a situation he hadn't asked for. He did it with his eyes wide open. He was clear about what was and wasn't possible.

But poor Anne. She got professionally damaged by that experience. She was nominated for a post in the Trump Administration and she was nixed by the Senate because of—basically because of her work in Egypt. Really an outrage.

Q: It sounds like a difficult time. You said the election did take place during the time you were there.

NORTH: Right. I don't trust my memory that much, but (Peasley laughs) I do have a vague memory of doing election monitoring.

Q: Right. And you have a vague recollection, were people surprised that Morsi won?

NORTH: No, no. That was the expectation. I think there would have been trouble if he hadn't at that point.

Q: Okay.

NORTH: Not that there weren't a lot of people who were afraid of his winning. There's a huge cosmopolitan population in places like Alexandria and Cairo. Many may not be completely secular but might be secular-oriented or Coptic Christians. Many of those types were worried.

Q: Okay. Are there things that you'd like to talk about on the Egypt program? I know you were there for a year and so it's hard to cover a lot of territory.

NORTH: Right.

Q: But are there any sort of lessons from Indonesia that would be applicable? I guess their histories are just so different that there really is nothing that is very applicable for the two very large Muslim countries, but I am curious.

NORTH: It's always felt like Indonesia's Islam is a bit different.

Perhaps that is not fair or accurate. Certainly, as we discussed earlier, coming back to Indonesia in the 2000s there seemed to be a lot more evidence of a more Saudi-like Islam. So, in many communities even a traditional Javanese past-time like wayang—shadow puppets—about the Ramayana or Mahabharata was no longer happening because of Islamic push back.

Q: Right.

NORTH: Wayang was so neat. An all night affair usually done at the village level to celebrate something like the harvest. It was one thing disliked by the devout Muslim community that was growing more and more visible. Those kinds of programs were being squelched in communities.

Egypt has such a long, long history with such a different arc. Egypt has had a national self-identity for several thousand years. Often ruled by foreigner oppressors from Anthony to Alexander to the Ptolemys to the Ottomans to the British. Islam came relatively late and is predominantly Sunni in character. The Nasser and Mubarak eras were different in many respects but they both worked hard to suppress and contain key elements of the Islamic community. That didn't eliminate the Brotherhood or stop its spread. And the rural urban cleavages in Egypt are vast with religious leaders being important local figures. And there is the Coptic minority community. So how Islam has or has not been allowed to be a player is hard to parse. Indonesia, for example, has two national Islamic organizations who are considered to be 'moderate.' They have been closely allied to various political dispensations. Not always happily but effectively

aligned. Egypt has a formal apparatus like that but it has been unable to get the kind of distance and independence an organization like Muhamadiah has in Indonesia.

Indonesia's 'nation building' is a recent project and one that is still in process. Bahasa Indonesian was one attempt to weave all these islands together. Redistribution of the wealth from extractive industries back to the regions is another. As was the post 98 regionalization program.

There had been many regional separatist movements since Independence, including Aceh. In the fifties there was one in Sulawesi, on Java in the Sundanese areas and they still have the festering one out in Papua. But many of them had been diffused effectively by decentralization. They're still in the process of building a nation where people identify as Indonesian rather than as Javanese or Sumatran or Batak or whatever.

In Egypt, you always had the historic divide between the south and the north but I don't think people would dispute that they were Egyptian. The Bedouins in the Sinai might be an exception to that and maybe over in the areas adjacent to Libya there's similar kinds of ethnic differences. A long, long history. And Egypt has always had the strategic location, it's been—it's like the resource curse for them?

That location and the canal have hindered their attempts to find an economic path that works for everybody and is sustainable. They export so many people to so many places who are highly educated but can't make a living in Egypt. The economy is totally twisted and distorted by state subsidies, by state control of the economy, by state decisions about infrastructure and the military's role in terms of where the benefits of the economy go.

They haven't really benefited economically and developmentally the way Indonesia has. Indonesia has had to struggle. It has had some difficult periods. But it has moved forward in delivering welfare benefits for a lot of people. Egypt not so much.

Of course, we'll see what happens now in Jakarta. They have a new president in Indonesia, a retread from the Suharto era who may have authoritarian tendencies. Maybe the Indonesian adventure will go south. I don't know. I hope not.

They're really different places. Maybe in some ways they share some similarities. At one point Indonesia was Buddhist and at one point Egypt had pharaohs, so (Peasley laughs) go figure.

Q: Okay. If you could have snapped your fingers and made any change in the AID program in Egypt, what would you have done if you could have just done it with a snap of the fingers?

NORTH: Wow. If the prism is development and development outcomes and you're not constrained by the politics, either the Egyptian politics or the American politics, you would focus on what's important to helping people to have decent lives. Not a given we are ever likely to see. Still. It goes back to the basics: building systems to get kids

immunized, give women access to reproductive health services, empower them in life choices, prevent other childhood diseases, childhood survival kinds of issues, getting those kids, both boys and girls, into quality schools and putting them on a path to being able to be successfully work in a more and more diversified economy and so on. In terms of the economic lane creating investments and policies that support sustainable, responsible macroeconomic growth, developing effective safety nets and eliminating, untargeted subsidies.

Q: Yes; in many ways, those are the things that AID has tried to do over the years, certainly on the health and education fronts, although perhaps not at the magnitude it should have.

NORTH: Despite the rotten politics and economics in Egypt and the difficulties in dealing with that Government to get space to do things, I believe we've had some good successes. I thought some of the educational programs we had for girls were great. Ditto health stuff. Another thing I like personally is long term training in the US. It's expensive but worth it. Those so trained can be so hugely influential in terms of the long-term trajectory.

Q: Indeed, I should add that Peter McPherson, the former administrator, is trying to get some people to work with him to figure out how to get AID to do more graduate training in the U.S.

NORTH: It's expensive. That's a problem. And you can save a lot of lives with low cost health interventions. But it is really transformative. When I look at Indonesia and who's running the country and making the right kinds of decisions, a lot of them have American degrees. But also, the good part of the Indonesian story is that there are now a lot of first rate Indonesian tertiary institutions. We helped to build them.

We talked about how catalytic human capacity building can be over the decades when we were talking about Africa. Think about where Africa was at the time of independence. Now there are more good public and private African institutions. There are Indonesian institutions of higher education, some good ones and they're doing the job.

Q: Right. We may want to do more in the U.S. but we don't want to do anything to undercut these local institutions which are doing a good job. It's a careful balance.

NORTH: Right.

Q: So, when you went to Egypt, you knew you weren't going to be there for a long time because you were on the list to become an ambassador. Can you step back and talk about how that happened? Did AID take the initiative in proposing your name to the State Department, or did you take initiative? How did it happen?

NORTH: They have some kind of process where they reach out. This was not the first time that had happened to me. I had similar discussions when I was in India.

Q: Okay. So, people in Washington reached out and asked you, so you knew that you were being considered. And at what point when you were in Egypt did it finally become a reality, that they were going to offer you something and how did—

NORTH: Part was a reality before I left. They had already identified the position.

Q: Oh, they had—they'd already identified the position, but you hadn't been formally nominated yet?

NORTH: no. There's this huge vetting process and a lot of paperwork.

Q: A lot of information, a lot of paperwork.

NORTH: Maybe it's easier for career folks because we already have security clearances. We're already in the system. I don't know how they do it for the newbies. It's a lot of due diligence.

Q: Yeah. So, you knew the country already. At what point did it become a matter of public record?

NORTH: In the spring. I stayed on in Egypt until I was confirmed. I did the hearing in Washington and then returned to Egypt to await confirmation.

Q: Okay. Could we talk about the hearing process? I assume that you went into the State Department and were given a lot of briefing papers before you went to your hearing?

NORTH: Yes. They have a pretty good induction process. They get all kinds of people who are becoming ambassadors. About one-third of them are not career people who may not know much about government or the foreign service. So they have a great intro course. Plus you get specific support from the desk and L.

Q: Even before the hearing you have a course?

NORTH: Yes.

Q: That tells you what the hearing process is going to be like?

NORTH: I don't remember if much of the hearing stuff came up in course. L works with nominees later to prep for the hearing. The course is scheduled on a set cycle because it's at FSI (Foreign Service Institute).

Q: Oh, so the ambassador course, that's that two-week course?

NORTH: Yes.

Q: Oh, okay. Yeah. But let's just deal with the hearing first. Were you in a hearing with other folks?

NORTH: Yes. I think we were three.

Q: And I assume it went fairly routinely? I think most of them are.

NORTH: Yes. There wasn't a hell of a lot of interest in Papua New Guinea, The Senators and their staffs were very gracious. I did have to meet one guy, Inhofe, who wanted a one on one with every nominee. It turned out that his key staffer was Joe Fredericks who had worked with me at USAID. It was a pretty smooth process.

Q: But they didn't ask you any questions about Egypt or anything like that?

NORTH: No. I think career people are usually protected.

Q: Yeah. So, they don't bug you on what you've been doing most recently.

NORTH: Right.

Q: Okay, so you did the hearing and then you went back to Egypt. How did you manage that with the mission when they knew you had one foot in, one foot out?

NORTH: Right. Well, I wasn't back for that long. My leaving didn't go well in my view. By then I cared a lot about our staff, the program and the country. And it was so important to US national interests. I was in a leadership role and working with a wonderful Ambassador and country team. I worried my departure would lead to greater angst and insecurity for our team. I had an amazingly effective Deputy, John Beed, but you really needed two people in the Director's office under those conditions. It took them forever to find a replacement.

So I left asking myself - why am I leaving a place that's so critically important to U.S. foreign policy interests and going to Papua New Guinea. What's the logic of that?

Q: Anything more on Egypt?

NORTH: Of all of the places that I worked, because of where it was at that particular point in time, it had the most intense oversight from Washington, except maybe in Ethiopia in 1985, when the whole world was watching.

I wish I could say that seeing that process in action reassured me about the quality of our decision making. Instead, it underlined just how hard it is for us as a government to act in a way which is appropriately responsive to legitimate public policy concerns that the American people have but which is also fully respectful of the histories and contexts and challenges that the people we are working with face in their own countries. How do you find a way to appropriately be a facilitative partner when possible and how to act when

you face blockages. At least do no harm? Not always so easy not to do things that are going to make it worse.

Q: Right. And it was a delicate balance under the best of circumstances, and you probably had people on different sides of the issues that saw that balance in different ways?

NORTH: Yes. Washington is a place where so much is happening. How many crises can they deal with at a time? And the people coming into those crises often are not subject matter experts, they don't understand the history or the societies that they're talking about very well. They may have some superficial understanding but they're concerned about the news cycle or the impact on someone's electability. They're not illegitimate interests. It's just a complicated decision-making process.

Q: Right. Were AID and State pretty much on the same wavelength most of the time during that period you were there? Or were there differences?

NORTH: It's interesting. AID didn't seem really engaged.

Q: (Laughs) Okay, on that cheery note—

NORTH: Well, that wasn't necessarily a bad thing. Maybe it was good.

U.S. Ambassador to Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, and Solomon Islands, 2012 - 2016

Q: So, you left Egypt and did you just go straight off to the ambassador's course?

NORTH: I don't remember. You have to get agreement from the receiving countries and that takes a while. Then figuring out when you're going to go out and arranging the appointments to present credentials. In this case I was posted to three countries. That's probably a little more complicated than normal. And so,

I didn't end up getting there until just before Christmas. In the South Pacific everything closes then for extended holidays. So, it was not good timing. (Both laugh)

But it was good in the sense I got a chance to join the staff Christmas party and to be inside the mission, meet people and start to understand what they were doing.

Q: Yeah. What was the training like? Were you the only USAID person in your course? What kinds of things were covered in the sessions? Much focus on Country Team and inter-agency collaboration?

NORTH: I think Dawn Liberi was there.

Q: Okay. Do you recall discussions about the interagency aspects of being an ambassador?

NORTH: They really tried to put together a good program that would meet the needs of both career people and political appointees. They explained how good missions operate, the importance of having a collegial country team, respecting agency differences, working as one U.S. government, all that kind of apple pie stuff. This was during the Obama Administration. There was a lot of encouragement for respect for diversity and inclusive leadership, trying to lead in a way that was respectful of other colleagues.

Q: Okay, so, you'd obviously served with a lot of ambassadors and had role models that you already had in mind anyway about what works and what doesn't work.

NORTH: Yes. Some kinds of leadership styles work well in certain settings and not in others. How do you develop or do you develop an awareness of the need to change things depending on the context.

Q: Did you think there was a need for a different kind of leadership style to become an ambassador?

NORTH: Not necessarily. In Egypt I had a huge office and incredibly capable people. I didn't really have to worry about internal management and basic systems. I did think about it but I didn't feel like there was imminent disaster ahead —a breakdown of systems. That sort of thing.

Papua New Guinea was a small post with a very challenging context. The chancery was living on a generator because the power system didn't work adequately. It was a very old generator whose use by date was long gone by. It wasn't reliable and making sure that it kept working was a full-time job.

I was going from spending much of my time being the public face of the U.S. and trying to get out as much as possible to worrying whether the power was going to be on the next day. Motivating a smaller staff can be a lot more labor intensive. These were really a different set of issues than I'd had as an AID director.

Q: So, a very different experience then. I suspect it was helpful to arrive at Christmastime and then have some time to get to know the staff a bit before going to present your credentials. And so, you were accredited to Papua New Guinea—

NORTH: Vanuatu and Solomon Islands.

Q: So, how often would you go to Vanuatu and Solomon Islands?

NORTH: I would try to get there at least once a quarter. So, it meant a lot of travel time. Because you couldn't just go directly. You had to go through Australia to get to these places.

Q: (Laughs) Yes. Tell us what Papua New Guinea was like? What was the embassy doing?

NORTH: We were really lucky in that we had some amazing young officers who were there. They had good ideas and wanted to do things. In some ways it was a weird post as a US diplomat. In most posts that I'd been to the U.S. was the predominant presence as a major bilateral and as a foreign policy presence.

In Papua New Guinea and the South Pacific, essentially, we had outsourced that role to the Australians and New Zealand. They were the big players in the room. They were invested into the region and had a lot of understanding as well as experience, albeit for Australia tinged by their role as colonial masters. I was very lucky in that my colleagues at the Australian and New Zealand High Commissions were both wonderful, welcoming and supportive. For example, to get access to intelligence reporting I would have to go over to the Australian mission because we didn't have safe enough facilities to handle that kind of material.

Of all the posts that I'd been to, the human geography of Papua New Guinea was the most complicated and fascinating. First contact in the highland areas came only in the twentieth century. The setting posed so many fundamental questions about culture, civilization, development, how to transition to a place that really delivered for people. Papua is the world's third largest island. PNG has the eastern end of the island. Very rugged. It's geographically incredibly mountainous or swampy and the implications of that in terms of social population dynamics and the structures of society are many. There has been a proliferation of languages, hundreds of isolated communities, many separate identities and huge levels of intercommunity violence. That had been ritualized in a pre-weaponized era where people used hand weapons but was becoming increasingly mechanized and lethal. People were getting guns.

There was almost no infrastructure so getting around was really hard and mostly by air. The capital city was cut off from the rest of the country. And it had a weird, relatively short and not so impressive colonial experience—split between the Germans and the British/Australians. They didn't really invest much in education or health services until after WWII. Independence came in the 70s. Missionaries were a big part of the setting.

And the WWII experience had been a really big event in their history and for the region. These were sleepy, isolated backwaters without a lot of people or activity. Some mining and plantations but mostly still small holder traditional farming and marine activities. Then the massive Japanese and American war machines rolled through the area, reinforcing folk beliefs in cargo cults with huge infrastructure projects – airfields, ports, housing, etc.

But also causing a lot of damage then and subsequently (unexploded ordnance was still a threat when I was there, especially in the Solomons where we trained locals to do demining.)

There had been epic battles at places like Guadalcanal in the Solomons and on the Kokoda trail in PNG. Kokoda was where the Japanese were on the verge of getting to Port Moresby and taking all of Papua. Very close to Australia. The Australians stopped them under extraordinarily tough conditions. The fighting was incredibly lethal. Australians still march the trail to honor the sacrifice and there is a large cemetery in Port Moresby.

The Solomon Islands, was where Kennedy had the PT boat incident. Overlooking Guadalcanal there's a lovely memorial. We annually commemorate the battle which was a major turning point in the war. There had been an embassy, but it had been closed in some misguided cost cutting in the 1990s. They are reopening one now.

Vanuatu is where Michener's *South Pacific* was based. It had been a French/British so-called condominium. And so, there were those leftovers and reminders of that brief inundation of stuff and suffering.

That legacy is still potent. Our biggest dollar investment in the region was an ongoing effort to find and repatriate the remains of US servicemen who lost their lives in that theater. I did several ceremonies when remains were found and sent to the States for burial. Very moving.

But that discourse looked back and we needed to find strategies that were forward focused. It's a different world now. Peeling back that past and trying to connect it to our diplomacy today and our diplomatic objectives was not easy.

We had to work with the governments and their ministries of foreign affairs in all of the countries. They're not big countries so they don't have big ministries of foreign affairs. They don't have big capacities to participate in international arenas. They aren't necessarily well represented in Washington or even in New York at the UN, much less in some of the European Union. The day-to-day mechanics of diplomacy like démarching on many different issues of importance to us met with a limited response and little to no follow up.

We had a regional fisheries treaty that gave American ships access to tuna resources. That was probably the major economic bilateral issue with all these countries. And it wasn't just those three. It also included other countries in the South Pacific. We renegotiated it on my watch. That was hard work. A lot of issues around catch limits, compensation, sustainability and governance. There was a whole apparatus to monitor the implementation of the treaty.

Q: I assume there was U.S. private sector investment, certainly in Papua New Guinea as well that probably took some of your time.

NORTH: That took a lot of time. There was a huge new LNG (Liquefied Natural Gas) investment by ExxonMobil that was going on. We had another ongoing one by a smaller

company. And during my tenure work started on another major development. I was very active in supporting American business interests and navigating that very gnarly terrain. The complexities of doing business in this kind of human geography are hard to explain to outsiders. The Exxon extraction site was in a remote highland area very far away from the coast. They needed to get the LNG on site, move it via a pipeline to the coast, do some processing and ship it out. In PNG that was all a heavy lift because their deal was with a not so competent, not so clean but very needy Government. And that Government could not keep its side of the deal without some kind of buy in and agreement with local landowners.

Never going to be easy. The Government wasn't very good at acting as a custodian on behalf of those traditional communities. So, negotiating those agreements and getting that access and then sustaining the agreements once they were made had to be significantly supplemented by support from Exxon. Then there were environmental issues. Somehow, the project did get built and the LNG has flowed. Exxon had some very smart and responsive staff. They did a lot of community-based work and trained and hired a lot of local folks. Still an impressive accomplishment. Of course, sadly, the new revenue inflows were not enough to avert a fiscal crisis for PNG and many were misused.

Q: Yes. I know that in part because I was working for an NGO at that point that had a grant from ExxonMobil to do women's leadership training. They were doing a lot with women from Papua New Guinea. It's a country with a lot of status issues for women. I believe that your embassy was doing some things on that front. Right?

NORTH: Yes. Absolutely. After my arrival our country team did a close look at what we were doing (tuna, a PEPFAR program, political work and demarching, a new small AID program in the environment, some disaster work, support to American business, an American space at the University, some training, consular services and defense engagement.). Then we brainstormed what more we might do. Two major targets emerged. One was around gender violence and the other was Bougainville.

Bougainville was an island off the NE coast of Papua which had a huge copper mine. That mine generated a lot of money which never got back to the community in significant ways, although the mining company had constructed first world infrastructure to support the mine and the expatriate staff working there. All of this was on land that local owners never felt they had consented to have used for such purposes. These grievances led to sabotage at the mine and a desire to secede from PNG – the government entity that had gotten most of the gains from the mine. The PNG authorities came in and tried to use force to end the troubles. Their intervention was bloody and ineffective. It triggered a long period – the coconut wars – in which a number of actors tried to gain control. None did. The on the ground situation was violent and life was very difficult. Ultimately, through gifted Kiwi diplomacy, some help from churches and weariness on the ground, the parties agreed on a process under which they would have enhanced autonomy, be able to elect a president and, at some point, hold a referendum on independence. Hostilities had ceased and some but not all weapons had been collected. During my time things were tense but peaceful and preparations were under way to hold Presidential elections.

Australia was heavily supporting investments to stand up a credible government structure that could deliver on health, education and infrastructure. The status of reopening the mine was stuck in limbo. The mine had been owned by Australian business interests which made it hard for them to engage substantively on political questions. We saw an opening for a role in facilitating the process as an active third party observer and through some support to civic society. We did that and it was useful and appreciated by Bougainvillians who, from WWII and the work of a gifted American Catholic Bishop, liked us. So that was one new initiative we took on.

The other major one (aside from managing planning for constructing a new Chancery) was domestic violence. In my initial calls to other embassies, the government, missionaries, NGO reps, civil society reps, academics and our own staff, gender-based violence kept coming up as a real problem. The imperative to act was galvanized by the tragic murder of a woman in a marketplace in daylight in the highlands. She was burned to death as a so-called witch.

We felt we really needed to try to do something. We had an amazing young officer, a woman, Susan May, who ran with it, ran with that idea and developed a great number of initiatives, things like the Exxon program. But we also hosted a national meeting for several years and tried to get legislation approved targeting those kinds of practices. We had great partners and attracted a lot of attention, but the bill still did not pass. We similarly worked to get more female participation in politics and economics. We didn't have much money, but Susan was a wizard at leveraging resources.

Q: Did you ever get much reaction from the government in doing those things? Did they ever say, "Hey, why are you doing this?"

NORTH: We got a mixed reaction. The prime minister's wife, Linda O'Neill, was very helpful, as were some other people and that gave us cover. We also worked hard to defer to local leadership on the work. There were some female politicians. There weren't many of them but there was one who was particularly helpful. And the corporate sector. There was probably more traction with the corporate sector than with the government ultimately, but that helped.

The drivers of the violence are complex. Some of it was substance abuse-related in terms of alcohol consumption. Some related to land disputes or family problems related to jobs and self-esteem. And it was also an issue in our own Embassy. We worked to protect and support our female staff.

I don't remember if I mentioned it but PNG was in many ways virtually lawless and dangerous. Indeed security was my highest priority in the embassy. In other posts the terrorist threat had been real. In PNG it was criminal violence. It was a highly unsafe community. Car hijackings were happening all the time, people being held up and home invasions were frequent. And so, protecting our staff was the highest priority I had. I'm very thankful that nothing happened to our staff.

Q: Right. Were you able to travel very much in the country?

NORTH: I did.

Q: Did that require a lot of security arrangements?

NORTH: Yes. You never knew. It was so lovely and benign for so much of the time, especially if you went to rural areas or the islands. But something could suddenly happen.

We did a road trip on the only major road in the country. It went from Lae on the coast to Tari. A multi day expedition on a road which had seen a lot of hold ups and was in terrible shape. We visited farmers, officials, missionaries, Exxon staff, local businessmen and many women as the focus was largely to honor the victim of the witch killing.

We had previewed this with the local police so we had their help. Nonetheless, at one point, we came upon two sets of very angry warriors from adjacent communities who were having some kind of a fight. They let us through without incident, perhaps because we were outsiders. The more significant threat was a robbery by 'rascals.' Thankfully we didn't see any of them but we did see birds of paradise and some astounding dancing.

I mentioned Bougainville. That too was a very challenging place to travel. The fighting had stopped but it was still sketchy and access to the former mine site was really a stretch but we did get up there once,

Q: You mentioned the Papua New Guinea staff. Since there's often a lot of discussion between AID and State folks about the use of Foreign Service Nationals or locally-engaged staff, I guess is the term used by the State Department now. How did you see the roles of Foreign Service Nationals, locally-engaged staff, compared to what your USAID experience was? Did you perhaps bring even more sensitivity to the locally-engaged staff than sometimes State Department folks have? Or did you notice any difference at all on that?

NORTH: I would say it's really embassy-specific. I had been the DCM in India for a long time and also was DCM sometimes in Zambia and then in Indonesia. In Cairo I was heavily engaged in mission management. I don't think it's fair to say that there's some kind of cultural norm in the State Department which isn't respectful of locally-employed staff. In a lot of missions I saw that the staff who were talented, who were really knowledgeable and had experience were deferred to by Foreign Service officers. The FSOs relied on their advice about how to work through a difficult situation. I saw some of that in PNG but it was a much, much smaller staff. There were fewer people involved on the substantive side.

We did hire some young people who were really dynamite. That was a good thing. They seemed to get along well and benefit from interaction with our younger officers. We had a few senior guys who were excellent. One an accountant, another doing security and one working defense. They really knew their stuff and were very wise.

The younger PNG staff faced all kinds of issues outside of work. Their lives were not smooth. Finding affordable and safe housing was tough. Safe transport was problematic. We did a shuttle but they had to be able to get to it and on it safely. We tried to improve our wages but that was a challenge for the State Department. The woman on the staff faced even greater threats. Some were in abusive relationships or faced child care hurdles. It was hard for them.

That's probably true in many of our posts. Somehow in PNG it just seemed like the choices were even more limited for people, young people with talent.

Q: When you'd go to Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands, were there any American staff?

NORTH: We had a Peace Corps program in Vanuatu. They were really gracious and sort of helped but Vanuatu was also a lot easier to navigate solo. We had a consular agent in the Solomon Islands, an American who had married an Australian man. Her parents had come there at the end of the Second World War. Her name was Keithie Saunders and she's still there. She is an awesome votary of the American flag and what America is about. She has done so much to respect what happened at Guadalcanal. To get the government to protect the area where much of the battle was fought. To get that monument built. To continue to observe the critical dates associated with that action.

Her husband, Sir Bruce, has done similar work to honor the Coastal Watchers who were predominantly ethnic Solomon Islanders who were key to protecting the sea lanes and alerting the allies about what was happening in terms of shipments. After they closed the embassy she became the guardian of American interests.

Q: Right. So, there was a point person in each country that you coordinated with when visiting.

NORTH: Yes. In some ways they're similar to PNG since all three have a mostly Melanesian populations. But there are differences. Smaller. Still islands but generally more accessible with more historic contact with the rest of the world. And generally more benign with better social indicators, particularly Vanuatu which is a tourist destination for Australians and, while still very basic in rural areas, a bit more economically prosperous.

The Solomons had a time of troubles when there was a lot of violence and government ceased to maintain control. When I arrived, a large peacekeeping and police training exercise was wrapping up successfully.

All three countries have histories of high turnover democratic parliaments. Prime Ministers fall when their coalitions fall apart, usually for murky reasons and it happened frequently.

In Vanuatu, although they had somehow qualified for an MCC program, we had issues because they were selling passports to disreputable people. That was always a concern.

They were concerned about the plight of Indonesian Papuans who they saw as Melanesians oppressed by Indonesia.

Q: So, I assume that one of an ambassador's function is the ceremonial and I assume that given World War II history, there were probably annual events to commemorate those events?

NORTH: There were in all three places. A lot of them dominated by Australia and New Zealand. Because as I mentioned, the Kokoda Trail in Papua New Guinea had been huge for the Australians so they had a cemetery in Port Moresby where many, many allied soldiers were buried.

Q: Did you have any VIP visits while you were there? Or just how difficult is it to even manage having visitors?

NORTH: I had John Kerry. He was mostly interested in Guadalcanal, so his trip was to the Solomons.

Q: That must be really kind of tough with a small embassy to arrange—

NORTH: It was but they did a fabulous job. It was really, really well done. All I had to do was show up. The government was extraordinarily excited to be hosting the secretary of state.

Q: Right. Were there regional meetings of the ambassadors to Australia, New Zealand and Papua New Guinea? Would there be occasions when you all would get together or with Asian ambassadors?

NORTH: No. State did have global meetings in which we would have a separate session for Asia.

Q: Were those annual, the chiefs of mission meetings?

NORTH: Mostly. But maybe not every year at the same time.

Q: More useful than mission director meetings?

NORTH: Both were useful. Mission director's meetings and those kinds of meetings can really help people to understand what's happening in Washington, what are the current important messages and what are the preoccupations that people are dealing with. I think that can be useful for both directors and ambassadors.

Q: How did you communicate with Washington? Was it primarily by email, cable, phone?

NORTH: We had regular phone discussions, video conferencing sometimes. It wasn't always reliable but it mostly worked. And visits, visitors plus reporting. We had a lot of

military visitors, I'd say. Actually, I had the Pacific Commander. That was another high-level visitor. I even had Henrietta Holsman Fore come out on a private visit. That was a lot of fun. She was kind enough to do some women's events which was really great.

Q: That's super. So, was it fun being an ambassador? Or enjoyable, I guess, rather than fun?

NORTH: I found it very challenging because of the particular time and context. I believed that these places deserved more careful, serious, sustained and sensitive attention from the US. We had loved them and left them after WWII. We had kept them on the radar screen during the cold war and then reduced our profile after 1989.

Those experiences had left some odd residues like the cargo cults and that kind of thing, along with the colonial era legacies, missionizing, weak human capital, bad encounters with extractive and plantation industries, poor infrastructure, divided poor agrarian and marine communities - factors like these all made effective development and democratic governance difficult. But, with patience and investments in education and health gradually things might get better. I certainly knew a lot of really bright and well educated Melanesians who were working towards that.

However, I feared external actors advancing external agendas would add to the adverse dynamics at work by trying to buy friends and not giving the islanders the space to find their own way. And China's growing presence in the region and their enhanced capabilities in their Embassies, new investments and growing business interests were a sign of that. Moreover, the debts that they were encouraging their partners in those countries to commit to were not a good idea.

I felt we should do more but work hard not to just cast it as a China counter and stick it in that box. And so, it was very frustrating. We had to struggle to get an AID program established. We had to struggle to get more military engagement. And so on. Some of that has changed which is good. But I still worry about the longer term.

Q: Right. It is surprising that there hadn't been more of an -USAID presence in Papua New Guinea.

NORTH: They closed the program in the eighties in the South Pacific. It had been based in Fiji and then, when they re-established it, ultimately, they re-established it in Fiji. An easier place to work and safer.

But you're right. In terms of population, most of the South Pacific population is located in Papua New Guinea. There aren't that many people in the rest of the South Pacific. In terms of servicing those islands and establishing relationships with the different states, there are a lot of states in that huge, sparsely populated maritime space. They're not big, not huge populations. Fiji might be logistically a better place to do it from. There has not

been a sustained long-term commitment to core development challenges in the region and PNG is at the core of that agenda.

Q: Probably the U.S. government decided to let Australia and New Zealand worry about that.

NORTH: Right. And they've tried. They've encountered some of the same kinds of disappointments that we have when you work in complicated places with partners that aren't necessarily the greatest partners in the world. But the Kiwis do seem to have a more sensitive approach and a long-haul perspective.

Q: Other things we should say about Papua New Guinea?

NORTH: Nothing amazing. (Peasley laughs) It was intellectually and emotionally a very stimulating, exciting opportunity. It raised more questions than I will ever be able to answer about our world and the genesis of human progress. Many of the islanders, especially on PNG, had little to no contact or understanding of the modern world. Much less a good roadmap to get their places to work or understand why some places don't. How you can or can't get to a better place over time. So many factors.

Take the role of churches in a PNG like context. Positive, negative or mixed? The entire country was now Christian. That change happened over a hundred years or so. My perspective on the advantages and disadvantages, the costs and benefits of being exposed to missionary influence evolved.

We had a lot of American evangelicals doing Bible translations into local languages spoken by just a few people in very remote areas. Sometimes that was complemented by literacy training and recruitment of local pastors and the like. Doing the actual work of figuring out the language and the translation was a lot like long term anthropology. (Over the years, PNG had also seen a lot of anthropologists doing fieldwork but they were no longer able to work safely, even in rural areas.) But did that help those communities develop?

I am not sure. I do know that I met countless islanders who were devout Christians who felt that adopting their religion had been the most positive development in their own lives and in their country's history.

The Catholic Church had taken another approach and their influence was immense. Initially, they had been hard on traditional culture and practices. They forced those who converted to eradicate 'false idols' and heathen practices. Things like men's houses or carved poles. However, that had changed and many local cultural practices were integrated into church work.

They had always complemented the pastoral role with investments in education and health care. The best University in PNG was Divine Word in Madang. They were active

in calming local tensions and addressing violence more generally, including helping us a lot on gender violence.

So, I really was forced to think about these and other factors that made life in PNG seem so hard. Unlike anything I had seen anywhere else. Things like norms around communal land management, strategies for empowering poor people in low resource areas, developing sustainable social services and economic growth in a nominally democratic country with a government that was usually absent and not able or trying to do much, especially not able to provide peace. Obviously, a lot of this is the development challenge any country faces but in PNG the slope of the learning curve seemed nearly entirely vertical.

Q: Are there still a lot of missionaries operating in Papua New Guinea?

NORTH: Yes. There are—American Citizen Services was mostly focused on several hundred missionaries.

Q: Are many of them up in the highlands?

NORTH: Yes. You would go out and meet with them as did our consular agents. The evangelicals had a community in the highlands with a landing strip, school, housing and medical services to support families who were outposted to remote areas. We had a series of great, great people in the consular role. They did a fabulous job of servicing them in terms of things like people getting born and weddings, deaths, that sort of stuff. There was a smaller Church of the Latter Day Saints presence. The Catholics had a few Americans. Some teaching and some in mission stations serving as priests.

Q: And you said in terms of traveling, sometimes you had to do it by air. Was that by helicopter mostly?

NORTH: No. There was good commercial air to many places and then there were missionary facilities.

Q: For the Fourth of July, were there events for Americans as well as the official national day reception? If so, did lots of missionaries come?

NORTH: We really didn't as most of the missionaries were outside Port Moresby. We usually did include some Moresby based AmCits. But the formal occasion was targeted on local elites and other diplomats.

Q: I believe that HIV/AIDS has been an issue in Papua New Guinea. Was the embassy involved at all on that front?

NORTH: We were a PEPFAR (United States President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief) country. And we had a CDC (Centers for Disease Control) rep there and someone from the military. We did some good programs with the military and with mostly

urban-based populations in the two major urban areas, a place called Lae and Port Moresby.

Q: And then, the gender-based violence, obviously, fed into that terribly so, yeah. Such a complex society.

NORTH: Yes it did.

You know, as I said, this is a country in which first contact at scale was recent in historic terms. The first contacts in the coastal areas started in the mid-nineteenth century. And they were not nice. Basically, people would come in and kidnap laborers to work in Queensland sugar plantations in something called blackbirding. There was no colonial rule in place then.

Subsequently the British were reluctantly nudged into taking part of the eastern side of Papua. Then the Germans felt they had to take the northern part. This got formalized at the Berlin conference.

And then, there was World War I. Before then not much had really happened. A small plantation sector on the outer islands. The start of the missionaries. But nothing much in terms of education, health or infrastructure. Not much of a government presence away from the coast.

After World War I there was a trusteeship, but they too didn't do much either. There were always violent swashbuckling types showing up to find gold. And they started having some luck. Their rip and ship approach led to a lot of violence against local people.

After WWII the Australians got more serious and started to make significant investments in things like education and health but not so much on infrastructure and not far away from the coast, except perhaps for the coffee producing highlands near Mt. Hagen. Modest but slow progress.

This was paralleled with some work on local governance structures. When decolonialism exploded globally in the 1960s similar pressures emerged in PNG from leaders like Sir Michael Somare. Suddenly, in 1972, the Australians packed it in without any real transition or a game plan in place. PNG was independent. But capacity was weak. A bit like many parts of Africa at independence. Not promising. Essentially, Somare held on for decades but didn't do much. There were two Prime Ministers who were reformers but their successes were limited.

When I was there Peter O'Neill was the Prime Minister and he was good at working his system and avoiding a vote of no confidence. He benefited from the prospects of the Exxon Mobil payouts which unfortunately for him were delayed and less robust than expected. Nonetheless he had already spent much of the money that didn't materialize. That led to a protracted period of economic malaise.

So, yes. All really, really interesting. But there must be some perverse curse when such small countries can have such huge, complicated histories, settings, challenges and social constructs. When I would tell outsiders where I was working, they would invariably say 'How interesting that must be." And perhaps go on to mention Jared Diamond's book on PNG or the work of anthropologists. But I would be thinking, "Sure, really interesting. But what about the poor people who have to live there?"

When you get to know the Islanders from the highlands or the coast you are beguiled. So much talent but talent that is not getting enough of a chance to flourish. It was very frustrating.

Q: So, you were there for how long? Four years?

NORTH: More or less. They had trouble with the replacement process. They asked me to stay and so I did.

Q: Okay. So, you're probably the longest serving U.S. ambassador in the history of Papua New Guinea.

NORTH: I don't know. I hadn't thought of that.

Q: Okay. So, then you decided to retire?

NORTH: I did.

Q: (Laughs) And did you come back to Washington to retire here or did you—

NORTH: No, I did it from the post. There is some kind of thing you can do in DC but I didn't really feel like it.

Concluding Thoughts

Q: Okay. So, we're coming to the end of our session. Any concluding thoughts on your really quite remarkable Foreign Service career? You've worked in some of the most difficult places, some of the most important places and in good times and bad times for all of them. Any things that you're most happy about or most proud of or things that you might have done differently if you had a chance?

NORTH: I don't think we have enough time to go over those things I might have done differently if I had a chance. I think I tend a bit toward the self-lacerating.

Q: Well, though, I don't think that's fair, Walter.

NORTH: Well, there are sometimes stupid things which you regret doing or saying. And then, there are things you wish you could do better, to nudge things so they end better.

But it's not always our role to drive things. In development it's not really your story. We are not the author. We can partner and facilitate. You have to respect that other people can and want to sort it out for themselves. Maybe you can be a good encouraging partner.

Q: Are you talking about that with regard to countries?

NORTH: With partners in countries. I met and worked with such amazing people. Some of those women who were the victims of gender-based violence, for example. You have to wish you could do something to protect them and to help them have safer lives, happier lives.

Q: Well, I think you can say that the U.S. government and U.S. embassies around the world have made that more of an issue and therefore given it more prominence within countries. Obviously, that doesn't solve the problem, but it nudges it along, so I think that's something one should take some small degree of satisfaction in.

NORTH: Right. And I guess I grapple with an underlying conundrum based on my work with AID. What does it really mean to be an agent for development in a construct which is fundamentally about exercising American power as a hegemonic influence in global affairs?

Q: You're not saying you think they're incompatible, are you?

NORTH: Not always. But does that absolve us of instances where it is?

Q: There may well be occasions in which they are incompatible, but as a whole?

NORTH: We can hope so.

Q: (Laughs) Would you do it all again?

NORTH: Well, it wasn't something that I wanted to do or thought I was going to do. It happened. It only becomes a storyline in retrospect. But, overall it was a great ride.

One of the things I have really enjoyed about retirement is being able to live in a community and really be a part of that community. To be able to speak and say what you believe without having to worry about whether it's politically consonant with the policy of your employer or whatever. And to just burrow into a community with real people and be a part of it. I think that's something that I missed in the Foreign Service. Oh, we had our own community—

Q: Right; that's a very good point. It is something that we all missed, I think.

NORTH: I was always passionate about the environment, justice and inclusion. I did get a law degree thinking I might work domestically on those issues. Would my contribution

have been better, different, more effective, more impactful fighting for those issues domestically? I don't know. So, that's a question.

Q: Right. But would you encourage young people to consider a Foreign Service career?

NORTH: Hmm. I guess it depends on what happens to our government. I'm one of those people who sees us at a fundamental juncture in the road with a stark choice between different futures.

Q: Right. That's a very fair point; a lot depends on that juncture. Looking back again at your career, how would you describe your major accomplishments—or at least your concluding thoughts?

NORTH: I was lucky in my bosses and colleagues. I hope I treated them and those who worked with me similarly generously.

Ethiopia will always be there for me as a consuming care. To have cut my teeth in development as a PCV working on the famine in 1973-74 was terrible but rewarding. Coming back in 1985 was shocking and disheartening but we beat the odds and helped a lot of people. Maybe I should have known better, but the chance to give Ethiopia a chance after the Dergue was hugely satisfying and exciting.

Another highlight was getting more traction on the HIV/AIDS response, including for our staff with treatment not just prevention efforts.

I felt privileged to work with two extraordinarily capable ambassadors in India and Indonesia on the strategic transformation of our relationships with those really important countries.

Similarly, despite how it ultimately went, I was honored to work with another amazing Ambassador in Cairo to do the best we could to defend and advance critical American interests under very uncertain circumstances.

And, lastly, of course, Papua New Guinea and Melanesia were so provocative in so many ways and so worthwhile tackling professionally.

Q: All good points, albeit modestly stated. I'm going to suggest we stop for now, Walter. Thank you again for sharing your significant career with us.

End of interview

<u>Addendum</u>

In reviewing and editing this transcript, I was struck that we didn't talk much about the actual work one does at AID or State. I guess that is because both the patient, multi-talented interviewer and I know and take that as a given. I am not sure others would. A few final comments on that.

I will try to simplify. We do a lot of analysis, research, writing, thinking, listening, travelling, monitoring, advocating and defending as we try to craft and implement development projects and programs that will work.

There are paper cycles we are tied to that are meant to get our money for people, contracts, grants, program assistance and operating expenses. It begins with the buildup of an Administration's annual budget request to get Congressional appropriations and (rarely) authorizations.

After an act is approved and signed by the President, we deal with report language about those acts which often has earmarks around places and issues.

Much of the buildup depends on reconciling global initiatives with mission developed ideas. That meshing gets repeated and adjusted after Congressional action.

At the mission level that process is usually coordinated by management through a program office that works with technical offices to craft a multi- year country strategy (reviewed usually by Washington) and budget requests by technical areas along with operating expense requests. This is the output of lots of study, writing and meetings.

Good ones reflect the depth of a mission's engagement with and understanding of the problem set they are addressing. Strong local partnerships are essential. The architecture of them is often reflected in the space a host country government gives to a mission to act. That is usually negotiated and formalized in a bilateral agreement with the host country government. Those agreements can sometimes set limits on the size of a mission and the lanes it can work in.

Regular communication with counterparts for the overall agreement is usually supplemented with a similar path of interactions with technical actors. Many missions have similar outreach and intensive engagement with non-government entities like NGOS, civic society, the private sector, local people etc. A lot of talking and listening. And then there is the inter-agency coordination angle. In the field that is found in the Country Team and the leadership of the Ambassador. In Washington it is often unclear who has the lead role.

Aside from a program office, a typical mission will have a director type and might have a controller to manage finance, a legal advisor, an executive officer, a procurement office to award grants and contracts and various technical offices. Those could include health, agriculture, economic development, education, food for peace and the environment. The mission should also have reach back to disaster assistance support. All programs and

operations are subject to audits by Regional Inspectors. Sometimes there is congressional oversight or information requests from the hill.

With the strategy in hand and a budget, the Mission has to develop a portfolio of activities. One part of that might be routine childhood immunization.

The health team, with support from other mission elements, would start an intensive analysis of the need. The depth of that analysis might vary depending on the scale envisioned. A development hypothesis prism would guide decision making. Some of that might be outsourced. It could include institutional (will this be sustainable and likely to be well managed), gender (no adverse consequences at a minimum, enhancing gender equity a plus) , environmental (no adverse impacts), economic (cost effective, affordable, likely to be continued after the project ends) and other analyses. Results of that work would get rolled into the design work and would include a lot of discussion with stakeholders within and outside the mission. Then the design would be reviewed, approved and an agreement might be signed with the host country government. That takes time and good negotiating skills.

Ultimately, if not program (cash transfers) assistance, a project design needs to be distilled into procurement elements. The procurement process is the Achilles heel of AID. It always seems to take more time than it should or you think it will. Good AID managers crank that into their planning tool kit and NEVER over-promise the time frame.

Scopes of work need to be ‘contractable’, a term of art. Usually meaning clarity on numbers of staff, levels of effort and clear tasks/objectives on a timeline. A version of that becomes a request for proposals and goes out on the street. Proposals are assessed by the mission. Very labor intensive and detailed with lots of rules. If things go well and there are no protests, you move to an award and the winner mobilizes so that the work in the field can begin.

The Mission oversees implementation and will arrange for monitoring and evaluation of results, results that are often compiled in a report for Washington.

Contracts can have lots of issues. Lack of cooperation. Uneven staff. Surprises. Behind schedule. Poor quality work. Other events. Any of these means more mission involvement. If there is an audit of any of this, it too must be dealt with. That too can be a lot of work.

The Grant award cycle is a bit less management intensive and gives the grantee a lot of implementation discretion. The assessment of a grant request is similar to a contractor proposal review. The actual award is usually simpler to execute.

That is a ‘simplified’ core process. Effective orchestration of it is a challenge, especially when you are in a high profile setting or working with a lot of challenging characters. And you need to spend the money or you may lose it or build up an excessive pipeline. It

is not always easy to keep the money moving. Doing that across a portfolio effectively is a key priority for mission management.

Management also means managing the players in the process and their needs. Things like finding staff, protecting them, training them, encouraging or disciplining them (morale), evaluating their performance (a mission can lose weeks of staff time with the preparation and review process. Senior managers can be called to DC for 6 weeks to join a panel that reviews a lot of files), finding good housing, caring about their 'dependents,' arranging transport, admin support, mentoring, recognizing their contributions with awards and keeping track of how things are going. And then there is outreach and telling our story. And things like task forces or doing something for the Ambassador like being an acting DCM or negotiating a problem.

Navigating this (and more,) with the occasional disaster thrown in, is sort of what the work is. Tough enough in a stable setting. Really hard in unstable and dangerous contexts. Thinking about it again is a mild form of PTSD. Amazing anything gets done.